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OLD WINCH, THE RIFLE KING; or, THE BUCKSKIN DESPERADOES.

BY T. C. HARBAUGH,

AUTHOR OF "PLUCKY PHIL," "ARKANSAW," "BILL BRAVO," "CAPTAIN APOLLO," "CAPTAIN BULLET," "OLD FROSTY," ETC., ETC.



"OLD WINCH AR' HER FRIEND, AN' WOE TO THE MAN WHAT OFFERS INSULT TO GOLD GEORGIE WHILE I SLING THIS SHOOTER,"
AND HE PATTED HIS RIFLE THREATENINGLY.

Old Winch, THE RIFLE KING;

OR,

The Buckskin Desperadoes.

A Romance of California.

BY T. C. HARBAUGH,
AUTHOR OF "PLUCKY PHIL," "ARKANSAW,"
"BILL BRAVO," "CAPTAIN APOLLO," "CAP-
TAIN BULLET," "GOLD TRIGGER," "OLD
FROSTY," "DANDY JACK," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

ELDORADO SURPRISED.

GOLD VALLEY, which lay at the foot of the western slope of the Sierra Nevada, was a picturesque spot. It was very large in area, and was dotted with many ranches and mining-camps.

Prominent among the latter was a place called Eldorado by the motley crowd of American miners, Mexicans and Indians who inhabited it, for it stood in the midst of the great gold-producing district, and naturally became the rendezvous of the wild, rough classes of California.

Far above Eldorado towered the snowy spurs of the Nevada range, and the grizzly could look down at any time upon the lovely valley and its denizens.

Eldorado prospered, and that without a woman within its boundaries. Occasionally the daughter, wife or sister of some ranchman ventured into the place, but they were surrounded by such a crowd of wild men that all had been eager to beat a hasty retreat.

A soft September day was nearing its close when a couple that attracted much attention rode into Eldorado.

They came from the east, where the San Joaquin rolled over a golden bed, and their fagged horses told that they had traveled a long distance.

The man—for one of the new-comers was a representative of the softer sex—was a grizzly bearded person of sixty years. His figure was tall, and as straight as a Cheyenne arrow; he had the eyes of an eagle in his head, the carriage of a person conscious and proud of his own abilities, and a voice when he spoke, gentle but, at the same time, full of resolution. He looked more like an old bear-hunter than a miner, for his buckskin garments were fringed after the fancy of a modern Nimrod, and his weapons consisted of an elegant repeating rifle, knife and revolver.

His companion was a girl not more than seventeen. Although she was white, she wore the tasteful garments of the Indian maiden, which outwardly consisted of soft doeskin leggings, and a frock of the same material, the latter reaching to an inch or so below the knees. Her feet were incased in a pair of Cinderella-like moccasins, and her head-gear was a unique cap whose only ornament was the gaudy wings of the California oriole.

Added to this outfit of wearing apparel, the girl wore a belt in which was stuck an ivory-handled hunting knife, which did not look formidable when compared with the huge affair carried by her companion. Her beauty was attractive, for her eyes were dark and sparkling, and her garments revealed enough of her figure to show that it was faultless.

It was a strange couple to be seen at Eldorado, and it is not at all singular that they should be surrounded by the entire population of the place.

"My name, gentlemen, is Winch—Old Winch, fur short,"—said the girl's companion, looking down upon the staring and gaping crowd from his saddle. "This gal is Gold Georgie, fur ef she ain't worth her weight in yaller stones, thar's not a woman in Californy worth a dollar. Jes' look at her, men, an' say that she isn't a daisy, ef you dar!"

A slight flush that enhanced her wild loveliness suffused the girl's face, and she threw a reproving glance at the old rifleman who did not notice it, but went on:

"Don't ask me whar I picked up this rare nugget, for I mightn't give ye any satisfaction ef ye did," he went on. "She's a mountain rose, thet will bloom in any climate ef she's treated square. Old Winch ar' her friend, an' woe to the man what offers insult to Gold Georgie while I slings this shooter," and he patted his rifle threateningly.

"Whar ar' you goin'?" came from the crowd.

It was Old Winch's time to start.

"We ar' on the trail ov a mystery," he said—"one thet consarns Georgie hyar. We hev'n't made much headway in the matter yet, but we hope to afore long. Whar's Plumas Roy?"

"Here I am!" and there stepped forward a handsome young man whose honest face seemed out of place among the roughs and toughs by whom he was surrounded.

"You're a young chap," exclaimed Old Winch, fixing his keen eyes upon the youth. "I wouldn't hev thought thet from what I've heard ov you. Georgie," he continued, turning to the girl, "this is Plun as Roy."

As the eyes of the young people met a courteous bow passed between them, and the youth who had emigrated to Eldorado from Plumas county, whence his singular name, advanced until he stood at the head of the girl's horse.

"We want to see you, Plumas," continued Old Winch, "but not in this crowd. We're hyar on important bizness, an' if I'm not mistaken, we'll stir Gold Valley up one of these days. I couldn't call on anybody else in Eldorado but you."

"I am at your service," and the speaker's eyes wandered to the girl as he spoke. "If you will follow me I will lead you to a place where we can converse with no listeners to bother us. I mean my own cabin, miss. It is not a palace; we have no palaces in Eldorado." And as Gold Georgie caught his smile, he turned to lead the way through the crowd.

The men of Eldorado fell back, and the Old Rifle King and his beautiful companion urged their tired animals on again.

Plumas Roy walked by the head of Old Winch's horse and carried on a conversation in tones which did not attract the girl's attention, for she was taking in the camp and its many rough objects of interest.

"The old fellow hasn't changed a bit since I saw him last in Starvation Camp," muttered one of the eighty men who gazed after Eldorado's unexpected, and somewhat mysterious visitors. "Ranch always maintained that he would turn up some day, but I never took much stock in it. But hyar he is an' I must do my duty. I can't leave camp fur thar's no tellin' what'll happen hyar afore mornin' with thet old devil among us. Didn't I hear 'im tell Plumas that Gold Valley war to be stirred up as it hez never been stirred afore? He's liable ter begin to-night, an' he brought thet gal along to catch young fellers like Plumas. The old cuss kin shoot with that kill-devil rifle ov his, but what's one man among eighty ef the eighty take a notion that he's lived too long?"

The man who communed thus with himself was almost as dark of feature as a Mexican. He was broad-shouldered, active and not unhand-some, although a raised scar extended from the corner of his left eye almost to the ear.

When he separated himself from the crowd, he glanced over his shoulder and found himself followed by a wiry little Mexican, whose snaky eyes glittered beneath the brim of a dark sombrero.

A rapid look full of meaning passed between the two men, but they did not meet until they had entered a rough-looking cabin, a hundred yards from the spot where the men of Eldorado had inspected Old Winch and his beautiful girl companion.

"Santissima! He is here, Modoc," said the Mexican, the first of the twain to speak.

"Hyar? Ov course he's hyar!" was the reply. "I wasn't lookin' fur him, but he came, anyhow. As he war livin' he war bound ter come. All ther grizzlies in the Rockies couldn't keep the Old Rip back, an' heaven knows thar war a power ov 'em around when I saw 'im last. Mex, you must ride to the ranch."

"To-night?"

"Right away."

"It is twenty miles, senior."

"If it war a thousand I'd send you off jes' the same."

The Mexican youth was silent and awaited orders.

"You're not to tell Ranch Rob more than I want you to."

"I will obey, senior."

Modoc picked up a small bowie-knife that lay on the rough table at his right. The next moment he raised it aloft and then buried it deep in the table.

An instant later the snapping of steel was heard, and Modoc held a broken bowie in his hand.

Mex the Mexican looked on amazed.

"Take this broken knife to Rob an' say he hez come—not another word." And the knife was thrust into the Mexican's hand. "You had

better take the black horse, for the night will match him in color, an' nobody will see you. Don't spare 'im ef he is the best critter in Gold Valley. You ar' ridin' for the life of more than one man. You must git to Ranch afore day, if it costs you every bullet on yer person, an' the last drop ov blood in yer veins."

"I will get there, senior!" was the determined reply.

"Then go. Remember the word, 'He hez come.'"

The bronze-faced youth sprang nimbly from the cabin, and disappeared as quickly as a pistol's flash in a dark ravine.

He hurried to a corral between Eldorado and the mountains, and selected from among the restless horses confined there a glossy black gelding, on whose back he sprung after having adjusted a Mexican saddle and bridle.

Away like the wind went the black horse as if he bore no rider. Swift as a comet he shot down the mountain trail for thirty minutes, and then struck across a portion of Gold Valley.

He seemed to know the road as well as his swarthy rider.

The sun had gone down, and darkness covered the earth. A few stars glimmered like miners' lights in the deep firmament, but they certainly did not show the Mexican the trail he traversed.

Where was Modoc—the man who had dispatched him on his mission—and what was he doing?

"It'll be diamond cut diamond ez it used to be, when Ranch Rob comes," he said, in gleeful tones. "Thar's nobody to stop Mex now, for the Injuns hev left the trail. He'll git thar safe an' sound, an' thet's all I want."

"Mebbe he will!"

Those three words caused Modoc to recoil.

He had just stepped from the gloom of his cabin, and an exclamation of surprise dropped from his lips. His revolver had been drawn, and was already cocked in his hand.

"Mebbe yer yaller tool will git to ther ranch, an' mebbe he won't," continued the same voice. "Ez fur you, Modoc, yer days ar' nearly numbered. I'm hyar to stir Gold Valley ter its depths, if it's necessary, to give Gold Georgie her rights. I warn't expected, ez I saw the first time I sot eyes on ye awhile ago. Old Winch hez a habit ov turnin' up when an' whar he's not wanted."

The left hand of the speaker was at Modoc's throat; his right thrust the muzzle of a revolver into his face.

"Go back into yer cabin; I don't want you now, Modoc," and the rough was flung backward with a force that astonished him.

His heel struck the threshold of his mountain home, and he fell at full length amid the darkness beyond.

"By heaven! we'll hev yer blood fur this!" he grated, as he recovered. "You've ridden into a devil's den, you an' ther gal hev, ye old devil!"

"We did it with our eyes open, Modoc," was the response, accompanied by a derisive laugh. "I shall stay hyar till Ranch Rob comes if the Greaser finds 'im. Meanwhile, ef you want satisfaction out ov Old Winch, you'll find 'im at yer service."

Modoc found the revolver, which had been knocked from his hand by the fall, and rushed from the cabin.

But his enemy was not in sight.

"To-morrer!" he hissed.

"I am satisfied; let it be to-morrow!" came from the darkness. "I came hyar on bizness, an' a part ov thet bizness is to use my rifle in writin' lead sermons fur your crew."

CHAPTER II.

THE UNKNOWN MAZEPPA.

WE need not say that Modoc was the only citizen of Eldorado excited by the arrival of Old Winch and Gold Georgie.

Away into the night groups of miners and roughs with no particular avocation, discussed the unexpected visit.

All agreed that the girl was the most beautiful creature they had ever seen, and not a few envied Plumas Roy the good fortune which kept him in her presence.

"The old rascal came by the beauty unfairly—I'll stake my claims on thet!" exclaimed a member of one of the groups first referred to. "Let's investigate the matter at daylight. He needn't say thet the gal's his child for they don't resemble one another more than an Injnn looks like a snake. We kin git up a court an' try 'em fur child stealin'. We hev'n't hed a bit ov fun in ther valley for a coon's age, an' things ar'

gittin monotonous. A court in ther mornin'! Let's git at ther bottom ov this thing."

"The old feller might shoot," ventured a listener.

"Shoot! Pshaw! What's one man ag'in' eighty?" was the contemptuous rejoinder. "He's got more sense than to buck ag'in' the hull outfit ov Gold Valley."

The proposition put forth by the man who wanted a court was favorably received by all who heard it, and when the sun again rose on the mining town at the foot of the mountains, it was plainly seen that some exciting events were about to take place.

The eyes of more than fifty men were fixed on a certain cabin, the door of which was closed.

"He'll come out pretty soon," passed from lip to lip as the desperadoes of Eldorado watched the but. "We mustn't tackle 'im too fresh, fur, as Ned remarked last night, the shootin' may begin too soon."

"Thar he is!"

The cabin door had just opened, and the imposing figure of Old Winch was in full sight.

He seemed to take in the situation at a glance. The attitude and the looks of the men by whom he was confronted must have told him that a critical moment was approaching.

"They're up to suthin', gal," he said in a tone which the men of Eldorado did not hear, for he spoke over his shoulder to some person in the depths of the cabin. "Git yer revolver an' foler me. We might ez well deal with the Gold Valley boys now ez at some other time."

There stepped to his side the next moment the fairy-like form of Gold Georgie. She did not quail when she saw the miners, but sent a look of trust and confidence up into her old guardian's face.

They stepped from the cabin side by side. The old man carried his heavy rifle half carelessly in the hollow of his left arm, but those who looked closely saw that his bronze fingers rested near the trigger.

"I don't see Plumas Roy, gal," he remarked to his companion. "Thet ain't the kind ov crowd thet the boy mixes with; but he's not fur off. We'll find him on hand when he's wanted."

The assembled roughs almost held their breath when they beheld Old Winch and the girl coming boldly forward.

"Jes' ez I told you last night," whispered a boyish miner. "Thar's 'shoot' in Old Winch's eyes, an' suthin' ov ther same sort in the gal's. We kin try 'im fur stealin', but thar'll be lively times in camp when we go to carry out the sentence."

"Never mind that," was the reply. "When eighty men can't hang one, we'll burn Eldorado, an' leave it to the b'ars."

By this time Old Winch and the girl had advanced to within twenty feet of the foremost of the duly organized lynch court whom they looked fearlessly in the eye.

"Cap'n, you will excuse us, but this ar' a court," said the burly ruffian, who took a step toward the pair. "Thet girl ar' yours by no right. You've stolen her an' we've organized a court whar she kin git justice. What's yer plea—guilty or not guilty?"

A broad smile overspread Old Winch's face. His eyes twinkled merrily for a moment, then flashed:

"Ask Gold Georgie!" he exclaimed, as he stepped back and waved his hand toward the girl. "Ask her if Old Winch hez kidnapped her. If she says he hez, you kin pass in the verdict at once an' perceed to bizness."

There was confidence in the veteran's voice. He was not afraid of his *protegee's* answer.

"I will an wer for him," responded the girl, in ringing tones. "We are friends. I am here because *vengeance* has brought me to Gold Valley! I am not a stolen child. The lips that accuse Old Winch of kidnapping tell a falsehood as dark as the heart that prompts them. Men of Eldorado, we are not going to tarry with you long. The mission that brought us to your camp last night is almost accomplished. If nothing prevents, to-morrow's sun will see us far from here."

"Thet's all pretty talk from a gal's ez well trained ez thet one seems to be," cried the spokesman of the court, with a glance at Old Winch whose eyes had remained fixed proudly on the girl while she spoke. "She isn't yer child, old man—"

"Thet's a fact! Gold Georgie is too good to carry a drop ov Old Winch's rough blood in her veins, but she's all the world to me, anyhow, an' I've sworn to see her through it to the best of an old b'ar-hunter's ability."

The roughs of Gold Valley were nonplused for a moment.

"The court wants proof that the gal hezn't been kidnapped," persisted the spokesman. "We hev yer word. Proof old man—*proof!*"

"Then Gold Georgie has lied, eh?" thundered the Old Rifle King, and before a single member of the mob could lift a hand the cock of his deadly weapon clicked as the weapon struck his shoulder. "May it please the court, I hold in my hands an argument thet hez convinced many a man thet he insults Gold Georgie at his peril. Her word is better than mine, for I might lie under some circumstances, but a lie would starve to death in her heart. I say, ag'in that she's not a stolen gal, but whose child she is is the bizness of no man who looks into the muzzle ov my shooter! I plead not guilty; now go on with yer court!"

What could the roughs of Eldorado do?

Their hands touched the butts of their revolvers, but not one was drawn. More than one-half of their number had instinctively recoiled from the muzzle of Old Winch's rifle, and the rest were nonplused. The old hunter had stepped in front of the girl, whose figure his body completely covered; his cheek rested on the stock of his rifle and his eagle eye flashed along the polished barrel.

How the menace would have terminated if a certain event had not occurred, no one could have known.

All at once a wild shout came up from the southern limits of the camp, and those who turned in that direction saw a horse advancing at full speed.

A moment later everybody noticed two things,—that the animal was bridleless, and that a human being was lashed to his back.

As the horse dashed straight toward the lynch court in the main street of the camp, cries of "clear the track!" rose on every side, and men who had faced revolvers without a sign of fear sprung out of the wild steed's path.

The horse came on like an animal goaded to madness by a score of spurs.

With dilated eyes and distended nostrils, and flecked with patches of bloody foam, he shot between the lines mechanically formed on either side of the street.

"Great heavens! a masked Mazeppa!" suddenly ejaculated Gold Georgie, as she turned pale and clutched Old Winch's arm.

The man lashed to the steed's back by several lassoes was indeed what the girl had termed him—a masked Mazeppa.

Stripped to the waist, his skin, where it was not gashed by the fiendish ropes, fairly glistened in the sun. His hair, long and dark, floated in the wind like the black pennons of a pirate craft, but his face—ah! that was not to be seen!

It was masked by a piece of dark cloth that completely hid it. Not a feature was visible. The hopeless expression of the eyes and the firm set lips no one could see.

That the unknown Mazeppa had suffered and was still suffering untold agony, the hands buried as it were into the flesh of the horse told all who looked.

"Stop him!" yelled a dozen men as the horse reached the head of the living lane.

Brave would be the man who would attempt such a thing; and the consequence was that not a person stirred.

A dozen bounds carried the steed beyond reach, but he did not leave the living lane until from the lips of the unwilling rider a wild cry had sounded on the air:

"Help! help! for the sake of heaven! If I am among men who will not save me, send a bullet through my head!"

Not a word escaped a single ear in all that breathless crowd.

"I'll do him the favor!" fell from Old Winch's lips. "Better a bullet through the brain than ter be chewed up by wolves in the mountains."

Nobody interposed a hand as the old man attempted to cover the masked Mazeppa with his deadly rifle.

He turned his back on the wild men he faced a moment before. Had he forgotten that the entire sixty thirsted for his blood?

For several seconds the old mountain man looked over his rifle's barrel; his was no steady target.

"Now!" he said at last in tones which only Gold Georgie heard.

The crack of the rifle followed, and those who were looking saw the head of the unknown jerked suddenly to one side!

A light cry fell from the girl's lips.

Old Winch lowered his gun and glanced at his *protegee*.

"It wasn't a death shot, Georgie," he whispered. "Let the roughs ov Gold Valley think it was, if it'll do 'em any good."

Gold Georgie gave her protector a look which told him that she was thankful that his bullet had not put an end to the masked Mazeppa's career.

"You grazed his head, that was all," said the young man who stepped to Old Winch's side a moment after the shot.

The old hunter and the girl recognized the speaker in an instant. He was Plumas Roy.

CHAPTER III.

THE TRAIL OF THE MYSTERY.

AN event like the one just recorded had never before happened in Eldorado.

The scene of a wild horse bearing through the camp an unknown man lashed to his back with lassoes was enough to startle every spectator, and threw the whole place into a state of intense excitement.

Old Winch and Gold Georgie were for the moment forgotten.

The horse and his rider had disappeared, but some of the roughs were still looking down the road as if they expected to see the scene repeated.

But the horse did not come back.

"What do you think, Plumas?" asked the old bear-hunter, looking down into the handsome face of the youth who stood at his side.

"I hardly know," was the reply. "How was the victim dressed from his waist down? I did not get to see much of him, you know."

"He wore dirty buckskin pants, but his skin was white as a water-lily. He's no Greaser, Plumas; he had the skin of a gentleman."

A strange light lit up the youth's eyes. Old Winch did not notice it, but it did not escape the girl's observation.

Meanwhile, one of the men of Eldorado had hastened to the corral and mounted a horse whose limbs were indicative of great speed.

"I can't get the idea out ov my head," said this man, who was Modoc, the burly fellow we have already met. "I didn't see the man's face—that's a fact; but I saw enough to set me to thinkin'. If it war the cap'n, I must catch 'im. The bullet fired by that gray-bearded old devil didn't do more than pass nigh his head. Tre boys all say so, an' so do I."

The horse was soon bearing Modoc down a narrow road that ran between the rear of the cabins and the foot of the mountain slope. In a few moments he struck the trail lately traveled by the unknown Mazeppa. Then he gave his brave steed the spur, and not until at the end of ten miles did Modoc draw rein.

He had not overtaken the masked Mazeppa, he had not even caught sight of the poor wretch!

"Thet boss must hev sinews ov steel," he exclaimed. "Hyar I am in Injun Canyon, an' not a hair ov 'im hev I seen since I left Eldorado."

The place called Injun Canyon was wild and picturesque. It was about ten miles from Eldorado. Perpendicular cliffs towered for a thousand feet above the rough's head, and the canyon was so dark that he could look up and see stars glimmering in the lofty heavens, although the hour was approaching high noon.

Modoc had not counted so much on the endurance of the horse he had followed; in other words, he had expected to overtake the strange Mazeppa long before reaching Injun Canyon. His own steed was well blown, and flecked with foam and sweat, he stood in the narrow road panting heavily, like an overrun hunter.

All at once he pricked up his ears, and Modoc uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"Hez suthin', eh?" he said, addressing the steed. "What ef the boss an' his rider should be comin' back? By Jove! if they ar', I'll find out whose face war covered. I'm hyar fur thet very purpose, an' I'll not go back to Eldorado without knowin'!"

The rough drew a revolver and gazed down the canyon, for something was approaching. There was an echo between the lofty walls, and the galloping of a horse through the gloomy place would have filled it with many sounds. But no horse was coming forward at a gallop; on the contrary, the sounds indicated the approach of a steed almost exhausted by hard running.

"I hope it's the wild boss," Modoc said, expecting every minute to catch sight of the horse. "It's some animal nearly played out—thet's mighty plain. Mebbe—thar he is at last, by hokey!"

Yes, the horse had appeared and, to Modoc's

joy, he saw the figure of a man lashed to his back.

The steed came forward with drooping head and blood shot eyes, the very picture of exhaustion. Unable to climb the mountain path that ascended toward the clouds from the other end of the canyon, he had turned back.

Modoc's horse sent forth a whinny when he saw the exhausted animal. A faint response was given, and the rough put up his revolver and leaned eagerly forward.

He saw that the face of the unknown victim was still covered by the dark cloth. There were now gouts of blood on his breast and arms, and his head hung lower than it had during the journey through Eldorado.

"Old Winch's bullet found his brain-pan after all—curse him!" grated Modoc. "I'll go back now an' settle with the old serpent for I owe him one fur last night's insults. Jes' ez soon ez I kin take the carcass from the hoss an' bury it somewhar hyarabouts, I'll turn my attention to the old man. Plumas hez got his eye on the gal a'ready; but he's a boy—no match fur Modoc!"

By this time the horses were together; their distended nostrils touched and they were making friends.

Modoc leaped to the ground and sprung to the side of the masked Mazeppa.

"I'll solve this mystery now," fell from his lips. "If this man ar' ther cap'n, I'll know it. If he is, Mex did not git to see him last night, an' he never got the broken bowie blade an' the three words I sent with it."

His hand was on the mask, which he began to lift with no little fear.

What did he see when he had raised it, and why did he start back with a cry that sounded far away?

"Great God! a yaller face, but a white skin!" he exclaimed letting the mask fall back to its place. "It beats my time all holler. He must be the devil!"

Ten feet away Modoc stood and stared at the man whose limbs, almost as rigid as the limbs of a corpse, had ceased to quiver.

He had stared for a moment into a face as yellow as a Mexican miner's, although the skin elsewhere, where it was not bloody, was as white as a child's. A pair of eyes filled with a wild expression were staring at the stars overhead, and the teeth were clinched like the teeth of a man in great agony.

It took no stretch of the imagination to believe that the masked Mazeppa was dead!

Modoc was astounded; he could no longer give expression to his horror.

"Let me git out ov this!" he exclaimed at last. "I wouldn't touch the two-colored man ag'in for all the claims in Californy. I wish I hedn't follered 'im. I might hev knowed he warn't the cap'n!"

The next moment he was mounted again and his horse's head was turned toward Eldorado.

"Come, Golddust, take me back ez fast ez you brought me hyar," he said to his steed.

Away he went, but a snort and the sound of hoofs in his rear told him that the Mazeppa was following.

The wild horse had rested a spell, and was bound to keep up with the new friend he had found.

"Follered by a dead man!" gasped Modoc. "Great Jehosaphat! This ar' more than I bargained fur. I'm not afraid to face all the knives and pistols in Californy, but you can't reason with a stiff. A dead man hezn't got a grain ov sense."

He urged his horse forward, and was soon re-traversing the trail to Eldorado at a gait which, under other circumstances, would have delighted him.

Every now and then he glanced over his shoulder to find that he was still followed by the Mazeppa's horse, which would soon travel abreast of his own steed.

Modoc drove the spurs deeper into the rowels of his own animal, but it availed him nothing. The strange horse had the better bottom, and, in spite of the rough's efforts, he came abreast.

Modoc shrunk from contact with the dead man with a gasp and a groan. If the trail had been wider he would have moved further away, but it was hardly wide enough for two.

The horse and his ghastly burden kept along-side for a mile or more.

"Curse you, I'll fix you!" suddenly grated the rough. "I'll leave you both hyar fur the wolves that'll come to-night."

As he finished, the ruffian drew a heavy revolver, and, cocking it, leaned toward the wild horse.

He grated forth an oath as he pressed the

muzzle of the weapon against the animal's head and touched the trigger.

He turned white when no report followed. Never before had the trusty revolver failed him. He felt like throwing it down.

"You're not to be killed, fur you're the devil's own!" he cried, rising once more. "By Jove! I'm not goin' into camp with a dead man at my side. I'd sooner ride into an Apache village painted fur the torture!"

Modoc flung himself from his steed as he finished, and sprung to a narrow bush-fringed trail that led up the mountain.

Terror now held entire possession of the superstitious desperado's heart. He fully expected to see the Mazeppa follow him, but the two horses stood in the road side by side and watched him with much equine curiosity.

"Rid ov ye at last!" he cried as he looked down upon the horses from an elevation of a hundred feet. "The boys'll laugh when they see me creep into Eldorado afoot; but I'll keep my adventure to myself. One ov these days I'll clear up the mystery ov the white man with a yaller face."

Modoc soon lost sight of the two horses apparently waiting for him in the mountain road. He had no intention of returning to them; all the wealth of the mines could not have taken him back.

The sun was at the meridian when the frightened desperado found himself once more in his little cabin. He had succeeded in reaching it without attracting the attention of any one.

Eldorado was quiet. As he passed to his shanty he did not catch a glimpse of Old Winch or his *protégée*.

Enraged at the revolver which had failed him in the mountains he flung it into a darkened corner and took another weapon of the same pattern from a secret place in the wall.

"Thet one is under a devilish spell of some kind!" he hissed, referring to the discarded weapon. "The failure warn't in my fingers; no, no! By heavens! I'd like to try this dropper on a livin' target. Where's old Winch? I told 'im last night thet I'd see him to-day."

Modoc moved toward the door of his cabin with the cocked revolver in his hand.

He was in the act of stepping forth when a loud cry reached his ears and a horse stopped in front of his hut.

The next moment the body of a man fell from the saddle and struck the ground with a thud that drove Modoc back with a cry of horror.

"The Mazeppa, ez they call 'im!" he exclaimed, fully believing that the man with the yellow face had followed him to his very door, but an instant later he bounded forward and was lifting the fallen person from the ground.

"Great Caesar! is it you, Mex?" he cried, now recognizing the Mexican he had sent to a certain person the day before with the broken bowie and the message of three words.

"What did the cap'n say, Mex? Ar' he comin'?"

The response was a gasp; the little Mexican had passed beyond the power of speech.

Modoc laid him down and opened the embroidered jacket he wore.

Something fell to the floor.

The desperado pounced upon it and lifted the broken bowie he had sent away to the man he had called cap'n.

The blade had never been delivered.

"Hello! hyar's suthin' else!" exclaimed Modoc spying another object lodged against the gaudy lining of the Mexican's jacket. "I don't wonder now that the boy can't talk. Jehosaphat! jes' think ov sech a thing passin' through a man's life-chest!"

While he spoke he was staring at the iron arrow-head he was holding between him and the sky.

"Injuns!" he hissed. "The red tigers shall pay fur their shot, Mex. We ar' pardans' hev been ever since you risked yer life ter save me on the San Joaquin. When I've settled with Old Winch, I'll pay the red Arabs fur this shot."

The eyes of the boy opened at that moment and his lips fell apart.

"He is here!" he gasped, looking into Modoc's face.

The desperado smiled.

"He thinks he's deliverin' the message to the cap'n," he said. "Yes, Mex, he is hyar; so am I."

Modoc saw the little Mexican's head fall back, and heard the death-gurgles as it rattled in his throat.

"I'm goin' to begin now!" he hissed, starting toward the door.

The next moment the doorway was darkened

by a human figure, tall, straight, and powerful.

"Wal, did you overtake Mazeppa?" asked a rough voice. "The gal an' I'd like to know before we move on."

CHAPTER IV.

THE RIFLE KING.

THE clicking of Modoc's revolver was heard before Old Winch had finished his sentence.

"Oh, if that's yer game, I'm hyar!" was the response.

The old man-hunter sprung back, and, eager for the contest, Modoc leaped clear of the threshold and halted in the sunlight outside, but he did not lift the formidable navy, for Old Winch stood coolly before him with his rifle at his shoulder.

"I'm ready ef ye hev'n't changed yer mind by this time, Modoc," came over the polished barrel of the leveled weapon. "I came hyar with a civil question. Did ye overtake the man on ther wild horse?"

"Yes."

"Wal, who did he turn out to be?"

"You kin kill me ef I know, Winch."

A breath of relief escaped the old avenger's lips.

"I know who you thought he war, an' so did I fur awhile," continued Modoc. "If he hed been the cap'n, I would hev recognized him ov course, but he warn't Rob."

"Thank heaven!"

"You say thet because you think you'll git to wipe the cap'n out."

"I wouldn't shoot him for the world."

"What's thet?" cried Modoc. "If you don't expect to kill the cap'n, why did you say last night that you came to Eldorado to shoot?"

"I came for more than that, Modoc. You haven't forgot Starvation Camp?"

"I hev'n't thought ov it fur a long time, Winch, but it warn't because I hed forgotten it. How did you get out?"

Old Winch smiled grimly.

"That's neither hyar nor thar," he answered.

"It warn't Starvation Camp when you an' the cap'n went away you remember, Modoc. Thar war b'ars enough around to meat a hull camp all winter, an' I war tied to a tree ez helpless as an Injun baby. Heven't I a perfect right, Modoc, to send a bullet whistlin' through yer brain, a right ter hunt Ranch Rob down an' s'arve him the same way! What would you do to a lot ov men who would leave you helpless to the mercy ov a herd ov grizzlies?"

"I'd hunt 'em down! I say this, Winch, knowin' what I do. It war a mean trick!"

"The meanest trick ever played in Californy!" was the response. "If Ranch Rob war the ringleader in the plot I hev no right to call him to account for it. Vengeance belongs to another."

"To the gal?"

"To Gold Georgie!"

"I never heard the cap'n mention her."

"Mebbe not, but he belongs to her fur vengeance just the same. Arter you left me in Starvation Camp you fellars went to the Siskiyou mining country, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Do you recollect the beauty ov Golddust Camp?"

"The Diamond ov Sonoma the boys called her because her husband found her in thet kentry—I know her!"

"Wal, what happened thar, Modoc? I want to see if you hev furgotten anything."

"I don't think I hev, Winch! I recollect thet the cap'n got love-struck soon arter we reached Golddust, an' ez the Diamond ov Sonoma war the only white woman thar, ov course she hed his heart. But, somehow er other, she didn't fancy Ranch, although he war a better lookin' man than her husband. We all know what the cap'n did then? He war bound ter win in the game he war playin'. He rilled the Diamond's husband one night an' they fought. The cap'n brought down his man. Wasn't it a fair fight, Winch?"

An expression of scorn twitched the old man's lips.

"Fair!" he sneered. "Yes, it war fair—ez fair ez Ranch Rob wanted it. Go on, Modoc. What became ov the Diamond ov Sonoma?"

"Thar's whar I stick," was the reply. "Not long arter the shootin' scrape she left Golddust, an' the cap'n gave her up."

"Thet's yer opinion, Modoc!" cried Old Winch with spirit. "He never gave thet poor woman up, but follered her to the bitter end. She went back to Sonoma, to the chil'sb had left there in her father's care; but Ranch Rob crossed her path like a hungry grizzly an' wanted her te

marry him—the man who had made her a widow! She wasn't the kind of woman what shoots. Her spirit war ez gentle ez a rabbit's. She hed a right to kill the cap'n an' nobody would hev touched her fur it, but that warn't her nature. She used to say thet heaven would avenge her husband's death.

"Wal, Modoc, to trim a long story down, the Diamond of Sonoma left her father's ez suddenly ez she left Goldust after the killin'. We didn't know whar she went fur a long time. Everybody lost sight of her—no, she war watched an' follered by one man. She couldn't hide from the devil who had sworn to make her his wife er else hound her to the grave. He didn't do the first thing, Modoc, but he succeeded in keepin' the last part of his vow. Me an' Gold Georgie, ez I call her, hunted the Diamond of Sonoma fur a year an' more. We found 'er at last, dead in a ravine, with a few poor berries in her hand, shoeless, an' with rags fur her clothes. Driven from civilization by her persecutor, she had taken to the mountains, an' thar, alone in one of the darkest gulches of the Sierras, she laid down an' died. She seemed to know, poor thing, thet the gal and me war close on her track, fur in her dead hand she held a piece of paper addressed to Georgie. She told her child on it to follow to his death the devil who had killed her ez surely ez if his bullet hed split her heart. Thet's what became of the beautiful Diamond of Sonoma, after you lost sight of her, Modoc. Gold Georgie war hardly big enough then to know what vengeance means; but I taught her ez she grew older, fur I swore over the poor body lyin' in the gulch, thet she should carry out the last request of the dead. While I war teachin' her we lost sight of Ranch Rob an' all you fellers, fur like birds of a feather you've stuck together. Thar's five of ye in Eldorado now. Ranch lives nigh, on the biggest ranch in Gold Valley. Thet's what brought Gold Georgie an' me hyar, Modoc. After I shot at the man tied to the boss, the gal turned an' thanked me, because I didn't kill 'im. She more'n half believed thet it war your cap'n. But, you say, he hed a yaller face like a Greaser, Modoc?"

"Thet's the kind of face I saw when I raised the cloth," declared the rough. "But arn't you mistaken when you say thet five of the gang thet lashed you to the tree an' left ye to the bars in Starvation Camp ar' livin' hyar now?"

"No. I saw all of ye yesterday." A curious light beamed in Modoc's eyes as he stepped aside, and waved his hand toward the cabin door.

"Look at the fellar in thar, an' ye'll not be so positive about thar being five," he said.

Keeping his eyes riveted upon Modoc, Old Winch strode forward.

"A truce for a minute, Winch," said Modoc. "Ye kin look without fear."

The old man threw a hasty glance into the miner's cabin; he saw the corpse lying on the rough planks that formed the floor. Beside it lay the broken bowie and the deadly arrow-head.

"It's the little Mexican," he said, straightening and looking at Modoc again. "The boy hadn't much to do with the tying scraps at Starvation. He wanted to help me away down in his heart; but you forced him to tie one of the knots. Who wiped the little fellar out?"

"Thet's what I don't know."

"It warn't done hyar?"

"No, he came hyar dyin'; he couldn't speak any more. I had sent—"

Modoc paused.

He was about to tell Old Winch about the errand that had taken Mex from Eldorado.

"Ah! you sent the young 'un to the cap'n's ranch with the broken bowie which would let him know that I war hyar! I kin see all this, Modoc. I don't think the boy got thar; if he did he didn't find Ranch Rob, er the knife wouldn't be lying thar. I'll take the news to the cap'n myself, an' Georgie won't be fur off when I tell him thet the old man he left in Starvation Camp hez come back."

Modoc's fingers tightened round the butt of his revolver.

"You'll have to fight me first!" he gritted looking into the old man's eyes. "Last night—you know what happened then! I need not repeat it. Drop the rifle an' give me a chance."

"The chance you gave me once, eh?" was the answer. "I'll do it, Modoc. Do you want any witnesses?"

"The body in thar is witness enough. Mex is dead, but what of thet?"

"I'm not hard to please," responded Old Winch with a smile.

Modoc turned and led the way into his cabin, the door of which was left wide open, so that the warm sunlight could enter.

The corpse of the little Mexican still lay where it had fallen from Modoc's hands.

With a hasty yet an eager tread the rough stepped across the body, then turned abruptly, and faced Old Winch.

The old fellow had discarded his rifle and drawn a revolver as large as the one gripped by his adversary.

Face to face the two men stood, with a corpse between them!

"What's to become of the gal if I win?" asked Modoc.

"Plumas will take care of her."

"Thet's jes' what I thought," was Modoc's rejoinder. "The boy'll hev a good time watchin' her, Winch. It would be strange if Ranch Rob should love the daughter ez he once loved the mother."

"Then he will love to his sorrow."

Old Winch said no more. His look told that he was ready for the duel.

"Let us get at this affair," said Modoc. "I want it settled one way or the other. I am ready, Winch," and up went his revolver, but a bronze hand closed instantly on his wrist, and forced the weapon above his head before he could touch the trigger, and the next second he was looking into the muzzle of Old Winch's weapon!

"Thet's a trick I've larned since I got out of Starvation Camp," remarked the old man with a grin. "Loosen yer grip on yer weapon, Modoc, er by the gods of vengeance I'll do it fur ye with half an ounce of cold lead."

As it was speedy death to refuse, Modoc let his revolver fall, and as it fell upon the young Mexican's breast it did not explode.

"I don't want you now, Modoc," continued Old Winch. "I hev sworn to corral all those who left me helpless to the grizzlies, but I've other bizness first. Live a few hours longer. Gather yer pards together an' foller me if ye want a little diversion. Bury the Mexican first. He wouldn't be hyar ef it hedn't been fur you, Modoc."

With a strength which did not seem possible in his arms, the Rifle King whirled the lurching desperado half-way round and hurled him away with a suddenness that astounded him.

"Foller me now an' sleep to night in Eldorado's graveyard!" were the threatening words that fell upon his ears as Old Winch stepped from the cabin.

"His last words war a lyin' boast!" muttered Modoc, snatching up the revolver upon which his hand had accidentally fallen.

A mad bound carried him into the sunshine, to see his enemy a few feet away.

"This is Modoc's answer!" he yelled.

The revolver already covered the old man's head, but there was no report when he touched the trigger—nothing but a metallic click.

"The bewitched revolver!" he exclaimed.

"Curse the dead man's spell! I'm at Old Winch's mercy."

At an avenger's mercy he truly was.

Old Winch had whirled at the pistol's failure. His rifle was already at his shoulder.

"I'll make it a double funeral!" and with the echoing crack of his weapon Modoc reeled back with a cry.

CHAPTER V.

THE DEADLY PICNIC.

WITHOUT retracing his steps to note the result of his shot, Old Winch resumed his walk toward another part of the camp.

No person apparently had witnessed the shooting. The rest of the citizens of Eldorado were discussing a matter which was destined to bear gory fruit before sunset.

The old man did not pause until he found himself in a little cabin in what might be called the outskirts of the camp.

He was greeted by two young persons who were the only occupants of the apartment.

"What has happened?" exclaimed the young girl who sprang forward and laid her hand on his sleeve. "We heard a shot a moment ago. Ah! it was your rifle."

"It war no one else's," was the reply.

"You—"

"I left a corpse in Modoc's cabin if I'm not mistaken."

"In Modoc's?" cried the girl's companion, Plumas Roy.

"Thar war a carkies in the shanty when I got thar," said Old Winch. "The one I tumbled makes two thet ar' lyin' side by side in the hut. I told 'im to keep off ez I war dangerous

when I war r'iled, but he wouldn't, an' so I showed 'im thet I meant bizness. It war Modoc himself."

Plumas did not reply, but went to a stout wooden chest in one corner of the room. Throwing back the heavy iron-bound lid, he displayed several apparently new revolvers, a brace of bowies, and a quantity of cartridges.

"If you have killed Modoc we are in for a desperate time, and so had better prepare for it at once," he announced, looking up into Old Winch's face. "In less than twenty minutes, unless we can leave Eldorado, we will have the entire crowd down upon us. Modoc was a power among these desperadoes. They will burn to avenge his death. This is my little armory. Arm yourselves if you stand in need of weapons."

"I've got weapons enough," said Old Winch, patting his gunstock. "Gold Georgie may want suthin' in yer line, Plumas."

The girl was about to say that her one revolver was enough, when the youth took an elegant weapon from the chest and extended it to her.

"It is light, but effective—take it," he said.

"Yes, take it, gal, fer thar's no tellin' what might happen," urged the old avenger.

The white hands had hardly touched the revolver, when a heavy blow like one delivered with the butt of a pistol struck the door and caused the trio to start from the chest.

"You war right, Plumas," whispered Old Winch. "The crisis hez come!"

Plumas Roy, holding a revolver in his right hand, stepped across the room, and opened the door to confront three gray-shirted men whose visages were dark and determined.

"Whar's the old man?" asked one of the three.

At the question the Old King of the Rifle stepped boldly forward.

"Hyar I am," he announced. "What's the rumpus now?"

"We ar' a committee of three from a meetin' of the Law an' Order Men of Eldorado," was the response. "Thet meetin' hez jes' disbanded. Its last resolution war one thet requests you an' thet daisy ter leave the camp within twenty minutes."

"If we don't, what?" demanded the old hunter with a twinkle in his eyes.

"If ye stay, suthin' may happen!" was the reply. "You see, Old Winch, we're a quiet, orderly set of men in Eldorado. One of the rules of camp is thet no white woman shall stay hyar more'n twenty-four hours. Some of the boys ar' quarrelin' over yer daisy now, an' if she stays we'll hev to enlarge the graveyard up on the mountain. So we did the next best thing—voted to ask you an' the gal to ramose the ranch. Californy kivers a heap of trouble; it's big enough fur all of us, cap'n; but Eldorado can't hold all the boys an' the person you call Gold Georgie. What's your answer?"

"Tell yer men thet they might hev saved their breath, fur we war goin' anyhow," replied Old Winch. "Twenty minutes, eh?"

"Thet's the time."

"All right."

The trio turned away with significant glances at one another.

"He took it easy," observed one. "I war almost afraid to sarve on the committee, fur fear the old eagle eye would recognize me, but he didn't. I'll never surget how he glared at us with them eyes when we lashed him to the tree in Starvation Camp."

The speaker left his companions and hurried toward the middle of the camp, while his companions proceeded toward the corral.

The death of Modoc evidently was still undiscovered. If his corpse should be found before the camp could be left, bloody work would ensue.

"Once beyond Eldorado and I shall feel content," remarked Gold Georgie. "I feel that our trail shall soon end, for my mother's persecutor and father's slayer seems within my power. Then I go back to civilization again to forget if I can this horrible but righteous work."

"You will let me accompany you, will you not?" asked Plumas Roy, pausing on the threshold of the little cabin which she was about to leave.

"Certainly, if that is your desire," responded the girl, blushing slightly. "I do not see how you have remained in this wicked camp as long as you have."

"I scarcely know myself," and Roy smiled as he spoke. "I drifted here without any aim. Once or twice I wanted to leave, but something—what it really was I cannot tell—held me

back. I think now that I was to remain here until your coming."

"I think so too, boy," put in Old Winch. "When the man we met in the mountains told us that we'd find a friend in Plumas Roy, I said to myself 'It's fate an' nothin' else,' an' if it isn't fate then set me down fer a chuckle-headed grizzly. But the horses?"

"Yes, yes," cried the youth, starting off. "I'll have them here within ten minutes."

"Thar goes a dog thet'll do to tie to," declared her warder, turning suddenly upon Gold Georgie, whose eyes were fixed upon Plumas Roy. "I fancy thet he'll fetch three bosses hyar instead ov two, although he hezn't told me about it. Thar's nothin' to keep 'im hyar; he's no wolf, Georgie, an' Eldorado is a wolf's den."

The girl did not answer for a moment. Plumas Roy had passed from her sight, her eyes having followed him as far as they could.

"You don't wish you hadn't come hyar, do you girl?" suddenly asked the old man, noticing the reverie into which his young charge had fallen. "Wouldn't you rather be back in Old Sonoma than hyar, among the devils of Gold Valley an' a man-hunter?"

"Yes, if mother and father were *there*—no! since they are not!" was the reply. "My trail must end only over the corpse of Ranch Rob; after that, we will think of Sonoma."

No response from Old Winch's lips. He stood in the doorway watching the camp that lay before him. He knew that every minute was sixty seconds of precious time; he was eager to leave Eldorado not for his own safety, but for the girl's.

It was time for the young miner, to be coming back. All at once three horses appeared in sight.

"I knowd thar'd be three horses instead ov two when he did come," murmured the old man, unconsciously giving vent to his thoughts. "Thet means thet he's goin' ter stand by us to the bitter end."

Gold Georgie now sprung to Old Winch's side, and the twain watched the horses' approach.

"Here I am!" exclaimed the youth springing to the ground in front of the hut. "As we are to leave Eldorado, the sooner we get off the better."

"Why so, Plumas?"

"I fear—"

The youth paused abruptly for at that moment he caught Gold Georgie's glance.

"Don't 'fear' for me. Speak your thoughts. You fear that Modoc has been found?"

"I know he has," was Roy's reply. "I saw a crowd about the cabin door. I was going to say that I feared we will be suspected."

"Oh, is thet all?" exclaimed Old Winch.

"Our twenty minutes ar' nearly up, but I sha'n't hurry a whit on thet account. Ordered to leave town, eh?" and the Rifle King grated his teeth as he spoke. "It's the first time in all my life I ever obeyed thet kind ov order, an' if it warn't for Georgie hyar I'd stay an' face the rascals. Mebbe I'll come back one ov these days an' stay till I want to move."

He now took the girl and lifted her upon the back of one of the horses as though she were but a child; he then leaped astride of another while Plumas Roy mounted the third.

"To the south you say, Plumas? Wal, lead the way. We don't hev to move through the main part ov the camp. Under other circumstances I'd like to ride down Main street with my rifle at my shoulder. You're the only thing thet keeps me from doin' it," he added glancing at the girl.

The party turned their horses' heads toward the south. They had to ride through a portion of the camp, but as it was deserted, the entire population being then in another part, they expected to get beyond the place without molestation.

Old Winch brought up the rear with his rifle resting carelessly over his left arm, and his eyes seeing everything as the journey progressed.

Suddenly a loud shout behind them sounded upon the ears of all.

"It's comin'!" announced Old Winch. "We're not to leave without a scrimmage. You two young folks ride ahead."

"No!" demurred the young miner, resolutely. "I don't desert a companion when danger threatens."

"By hokey! that's the true grit!" muttered the old man. "Look yonder! tell me thet them varmints hev'n't an idea who wiped Modoc out!"

The three looked, to behold fifty or sixty men approaching.

The flashes of dark eyes and the revolvers clutched by rough hands told the threatened trio that if they stopped to face the mob blood would flow.

Old Winch had not turned his horse's head toward the gang, but he had turned in his saddle, and was presenting to the roughs a visage full of defiance.

"This is the kind ov a picnic I like!" he said, in low tones. "Them wolves ar' sayin' to themselves: 'What's one man ag'in' fifty?' I'll answer thet question pretty soon."

At a distance of sixty steps from the immovable old bear-hunter, the men of Eldorado stopped.

"Wal, what's wantin'?" he demanded.

"Blood!" shouted the leader of the mob, in whose hands was a repeating rifle. "We want the blood ov the man who killed Modoc an' Mex."

"You'll hev to hunt Injuns if you want to avenge thet Greaser, but ez fur the man what dropped Modoc, he is hyar ready fur the sport to begin. I am the man—Old Winch, at yer service, men ov Gold Valley!"

Everything was ready for the battle to open, but the mob held back.

"We might hurt the girl. We don't want innocent blood!" declared the leader.

Old Winch sent a quick glance toward Gold Georgie.

"Take her away, Plumas," he ordered.

"Let me stay," pleaded the girl, "or let us all go."

"I stay hyar!" was the determined answer. "Lead her boss away, boy."

As eager to remain and face the mob as Georgie was to stay with her protector, Plumas Roy reluctantly took the bridle of her horse and led it away.

"Now I'm alone," said Old Winch to the desperadoes. "Shall it be one at a time er the hull ov ye at once?"

"All of us!" rung from fifty throats.

"Suit yerselves. Here goes!"

Hard upon his last word his rifle struck his shoulder, and almost before he had time to glance over the barrel he was pouring the contents of the steel chambers into the face of the mob.

He shot seemingly without any effort at all, but at each discharge a man fell, not wounded but dead, invariably pierced through the brain.

"Thet's what I call bizness!" he exclaimed, as the roughs of Eldorado reeled from before the deadly fire.

They had not forgotten their revolvers, but the old marksman still occupied the saddle, although once he reeled half-way around like a man bullet-struck.

All at once he turned his horse's head in the direction Plumas Roy and the girl had taken.

A few bullets followed him, but did no harm, and a cry of joy burst from Gold Georgie's lips when she saw him riding toward her.

But the next moment her face grew pale, for she saw that all color had fled from his.

"Yes—I'm winged, girl," said the old man. "Thar's no use in keepin' thet fact back. It war the liveliest picnic I ever hed. Confound it, Plumas, if I don't see double!"

The young miner saw the old hunter reel, and leaned forward to catch him.

"They've drilled a tunnel through my life-box, Plumas, but you ought ter see the lay-out I left back yonder."

A grim smile followed these words, and Old Winch would have fallen if Roy had not held him up.

The next minute three horses were galloping from the spot.

CHAPTER VI.

THE MASKED MAZEPPA AGAIN.

"P'R'APS we'd better stop hyar, Plumas."

These words dropped from Old Winch's lips five miles beyond the capital of Gold Valley, and in the center of a pretty little pass where bubbled a spring of the coolest and clearest water.

"They will follow us," said the miner. "I had a place in my mind; it is three miles further on."

"No, we stop here. If they come—why, thar'll hev to be another picnic, thet's all!"

Truth to tell, the old marksman's wound had greatly weakened him, and he knew that it had to be attended to with some kind of surgery, or the great aim of his life would never be accomplished.

He got to the ground without assistance, and laid himself upon the velvety grass that bordered the spring.

His face was still pale, but his teeth were firm set, and Plumas Roy noticed that he did not neglect to carry his rifle to the spot where he cast himself upon the ground.

"Now," he said to the youth, "you must play surgeon, boy, with my help. The wound is in my left breast. Open my coat and look at it."

Roy knelt beside Old Winch and proceeded to obey his commands.

Gold Georgie, holding the reins of the three horses, knelt there, too. It was a strange tableau.

The cool spring water washed the blood away from the hurt, and Old Winch gritted his teeth when he looked down upon the gaping wound that stood revealed.

"Pshaw! Is that all?" he exclaimed, glancing up with a smile into the young couple's faces. "Is that all they gave me in return fur ten dead men? Why, it doesn't begin to make things even, does it, Plumas? I more 'n half wish they would come. I'd like to show 'em thet it takes more 'n one bullet to kill the man who war once left to ther b'ars in Starvation Camp. Now go to work, boy. Georgie, you kin do nothin'. Take one of the hosses an' ride back a little ways an' watch."

Happy that Old Winch's hurt was not to prove fatal, Gold Georgie sprung up, mounted one of the steeds without help, and rode toward the mouth of the pass by which they had entered it.

From the spot where she halted she could see far down the wild road they had lately traversed at a furious gallop. Over it the men of Eldorado would have to approach if they had pursued them.

But no moving figures now met the girl's gaze. The landscape lay inanimate before her vision.

Perhaps the wild denizens of Eldorado had had enough of Old Winch, that they were willing to let him depart unpursued after his terrible good-byes.

A little bend in the trail running through the pass separated the girl from her companions, but she could hear the old man's rough voice and Plumas Roy's softer tones.

Ten minutes passed and the landscape before the girl was not disturbed. Another ten were waning when several dark objects that seemed imbued with motion appeared at the place where the trail seemed to lose itself.

Gold Georgie involuntarily started, but she did not turn to alarm those behind her.

"I'll see what the are," she said, audibly to herself, as she continued to watch the moving specks.

She saw the far-away objects increase in size, for they were approaching, but not at a very rapid gait, therefore she could not think that they were the men of Eldorado.

All at once the figures disappeared, but three minutes later they burst into view again, and so suddenly and near that the girl started with an exclamation of surprise.

"Indians!" she exclaimed.

Yes, the horsemen consisted of thirteen red-skins, for she could count them now without difficulty.

Georgie in her time had seen many Indians. The representatives of various tribes had visited the wild capital of Sonoma county during her residence there, and with more than one chief she had become well acquainted.

While the great majority of the California Indians were at the time of which we write—two years back—at peace with the whites, the red-skins whose lodges were beyond the State's eastern borders often entered it for purposes of plunder and sometimes of murder.

The red thirteen were riding directly toward the pass guarded by Old Winch's *protegee*, but as yet she had not been observed.

When she saw them halt not more than two hundred yards away and at a spot where she knew another trail branched off from the one that ran on to the pass, she hoped that they were going to change their course.

"What do I see—a prisoner?" fell from Gold Georgie's lips as she gazed, for the rear of the band had come up and she saw that one of the horses carried a captive.

The reader may imagine the eagerness with which the girl leaned forward for the purpose of scanning, if possible, the face of the man thus environed by the red Arabs of California.

"It must be—it is the Unknown Mazeppa!" suddenly cried the girl. "He has fallen into the hands of a lot of Indians who have proved a little more merciful than his other foes. But why haven't they stripped the dark cloth from his face?"

The amazed girl could not remove her eyes

from the man whom she called the Unknown Mazeppa, lately carried through Eldorado at the top of a mad horse's speed.

She could see that he was still stripped to the waist, but he no longer lay helpless on the horse's back to which he had been lashed with lassoes, but he sat bolt upright, watched by the red-men by whom he was surrounded.

Her curiosity was rife; she would have given much to have been permitted to peer beneath the dark mask that concealed the prisoner's face.

He took no part in the council held by the savages where the trail left the main road; his future fate did not seem to trouble him at all.

"Ah! they are taking the main trail!" said Gold Georgie, turning her horse toward the friends. "We must get out of their road," and she hastened back to give the alarm.

"Injuns with the masked rider!" exclaimed Old Winch, astonished. "We don't run, Georgie—not a bit of it! I've an idea who that man is, an' you'd vote to stay hyar if you shared it with me. Whar ar' they?"

His wound had been dressed, but he was in no fighting condition, yet he went to his horse, seized the bridle and with difficulty seated himself once more in the Mexican saddle.

Plumas Roy threw a look at the girl which was quickly understood.

"If you think so," she whispered, "we must get him away before the Indians enter the pass. Ride to the other side of the horse and seize the bridle. I will attend to this side. Quick! no time is to be lost."

The flashes of Old Winch's eyes had told his younger companions that his mind was wandering, and they had determined to remove him from the pass against his will.

At the same instant their hands seized the bridle of his horse, one on either side, and, at a word from Plumas, their steeds turned, forcing Old Winch's to do likewise.

"Hyar! what does this mean?" burst from the old man's lips. "I'm worth all the dead men I left in Eldorado. Hurrah for Old Winch! ha, ha, ha!"

That laugh was enough.

Roy and the girl held on to the reins.

Suddenly there rung behind them a number of whoops that awakened the echoes of the pass.

Old Winch heard and responded with a wild yell of defiance, which was repeated again and again, and which no one could check.

He tried in his frenzy to tear Roy's hands loose, and then Gold Georgie's, but in vain.

"Hold on for his life!" said the girl to the young miner. "Recollect that he's the best friend I have on earth—that he must be saved at all hazards."

The Indians were now in sight, and having caught glimpses of the trio flying before them, they had redoubled their yells, and were urging their steeds to extra efforts.

All at once Old Winch threw himself from the saddle against the young miner, and with a force that almost unseated him.

The girl's heart seemed to leap into her throat. She saw the youth recover and try to prevent the old marksman from falling between the two steeds, but his strength was not sufficient for the task.

In another instant Old Winch struck the ground, and, escaping the horses' hoofs, was rising to face the on-rushing red-skins.

"Stand by him—to the last!" shouted Gold Georgie, reining in her horse as quickly as possible, and then, not looking to see whether Roy had heard her, she whirled toward the Indians and covered their foremost braves with two revolvers.

Old Winch had risen and drawn his revolver, and Plumas Roy was at the girl's side, showing to the red-skins a steady hand and flashing eyes.

Thus confronted when they least expected such a movement, the pursuers involuntarily recoiled—all but one horseman.

He kept on with a loud cry, that sounded like a yell of triumph.

"The masked Mazeppa!" ejaculated Roy. "Make room for the wretch and let him escape, Georgie!"

The girl had no notion of attempting to blockade the Mazeppa's way.

Old Winch, however, maddened by his wound did not stir. He seemed to be waiting for the mystery with a demoniac glee which he could not conceal.

The next moment the bridleless steed and his strange rider were upon him. The old man threw himself straight at the Mazeppa to be knocked aside and sent spinning away with a groan.

"He is killed!" gasped Georgie, turning pale at the sight.

"No," said Roy; "but the demon wants you. My God!"

His startling cry was forced from his lips by the masked man's action.

His steed had scarcely dashed Old Winch aside before he came up with the girl.

The young miner tried to save the hunter's *protegee*, but the revolver which he raised was not discharged, for the two came together the moment his finger found the trigger, and a naked arm tore Georgie from the saddle as the wild horse swept by.

All this in less time than we have described the startling scene.

Plumas Roy, horror-struck, almost reeled from the saddle.

When he recovered Georgie and her captor had disappeared, and the Indians were approaching with their hands above their heads.

"Thank heaven! we shall not have to fight them!" said the young miner. "If I mistake not the unknown Mazeppa will not enjoy his victory long."

Ah! if he could have foreseen the peril destined to follow the wild event we have just recorded, brave as he was he might have wished himself a thousand miles from Gold Valley and its inhabitants.

CHAPTER VII.

THE DEATH-TRAP.

PLUMAS ROY and Old Winch were soon surrounded by the Indians whose leader was a stalwart ill-visaged fellow known as Red Star.

"White ranchero carry off gal, eh?" queried the chief addressing the youthful miner.

"Yes, but he shall not keep her in his clutches long!"

"Young gold-hunter right. Red Star's braves hate the pale ranchero," and the Indian waved his hand toward the twelve half-naked red skins a few paces behind him. "They find him yesterday exercising his horse, an' they catch 'im with a lasso. Then they tie him to the wildest horse in his corral an' send him away."

"Did he beg?" asked Old Winch, from whose eyes had already fled the wildness that had brought about the catastrophe recorded at the close of the foregoing chapter.

"What does my hunter brother think?" exclaimed Red Star. "Did he ever see the white ranchero beg?"

"I never did, chief, but what you did to 'im would try anybody."

Red Star smiled.

"The white man was as brave as an eagle. Ah! he did beg—Red Star had forgotten. But it was for his shooting irons, white hunter. He wanted to fight Red Star and his braves with them, but Red Star said no, and commanded the lassoes to be wound around his body."

"I don't know who your victim is, but I used to know a man who would not have begged for mercy if his enemies war about to lash him to a boss's back. We used to call 'im Capt'in Rob!"

The Indian darted a quick look at his braves.

"It is the same man, white hunter," he said, turning to Old Winch.

"Do you hear that, Plumas?" he exclaimed, whirling upon the young miner. "The masked Mazeppa, ez you call 'im war nobody but Ranch Rob, the very man whose blood Gold Georgie wants."

Plumas Roy could not but start.

"It seems incredible, and yet—"

"An' yet you've got to take it all down, eh, Roy? It's easy to tell whar he'll break fur arter he leaves the pass. You know the ranch, you say?"

"Every foot of it."

"Good! I feel like the bullet the men of Eldorado gave me awhile ago ain't goin' to do much harm. I war kinder out ov my head a while back, warn't I Plumas? Ef it hedn't been fur me we wouldn't hev' gotten inter this predicament an' Gold Georgie would be with us still an' not in the clutches of that devil. But never mind, boy. Old Winch hez passed ther crazy crisis, an' from this time on he'll hev' a squar' head on his shoulders. We'll be down to ther ranch afore long, an' ther'll be some lively tusselin' fur ther gal."

We need not say that the young miner was pleased to see Old Winch talk in such a rational manner. He no longer looked like a maniac, and the discovery of the masked Mazeppa's identity seemed to have infused new life into his body.

He was once more the iron-nerved old grizzly fighter of the Rockies.

Red Star and his band held a deep grudge

against the man whom they had lashed to his most ungovernable horse. When they freed the animal and urged him from the scene of the ranchero's capture, they thought they had seen both horse and rider for the last time, but fate had ordained otherwise. They had come suddenly upon the exhausted horse and were astonished to discover that their Mazeppa had not been killed during the mad journey through the mountains.

He was unbound and reseated on the back of a fresh horse, while the wild one was left to roam at large. Red Star was reserving the ranchero for a fate more terrible than death on the back of one of his own steeds, and he was being conducted to the place of torture when he made his escape in the pass and disappeared, carrying with him the old bear-fighter's beautiful *protegee*.

Plumas Roy's proposition to follow the ranchero and his unwilling captive was received with shouts of approval by the red-skins, who were eager to get the masked Mazeppa into their hands again.

"You caught him on his ranch you say, Red Star?" asked Old Winch.

"Yes, white hunter."

"Since thet did you chase a yaller boy—a young Greaser?"

"We ran the little one hard," was the answer. "He was riding to the ranchero's big lodge, but we turned him back toward the gold town, an' sent our arrows into his body."

"You fixed him, too, fur he war lyin' dead in Modoc's shanty when I left Eldorado. He didn't git to Ranch Rob's with the broken bowie Modoc sent with him. Poor little Greaser! I pitied him when they made 'im tie one ov the knots thet day at Starvation Camp. I don't think I would ever hev' killed him, fur somehow or other I could never hold a grudge ag'in' the boy."

When the occupants of the pass, red and white, moved from the spot, they took up the trail made by the Mazeppa's horse, but when the end of the pass was reached the hunters turned to the left and proceeded in a southerly direction, thus abandoning the trail as it were.

This proceeding would have astonished the reader if he could have witnessed it.

As Ranch Rob had kept straight on after quitting the pass, why did not his hunters keep the trail and press on at the top of their animals' speed?

More than once the young miner found himself looking at Old Winch, who once more carried his deadly repeating rifle, while he sat almost bolt upright in his saddle entirely unlike a man who was badly wounded.

The twain had never met before their encounter in Eldorado the preceding day. Plumas had never even heard of Old Winch, for he was nobody's confidant, ther fore Modoc had never told him the story of Starvation Camp, a name well known among the annals of Northern California.

We need not say that from the first, his heart had been captured by the fair creature whom Old Winch had brought into Gold Valley in search of vengeance.

Gold Georgie had smiled upon him and he thought he had caught her eying him softly on several occasions; but after all, their meeting might amount to nothing; there might be a lover among the hills of Sonoma to whom the girl would return when she had accomplished her purpose.

Old Winch noticed the youth's abstraction as they rode through the lovely little valley which they had entered after leaving the pass.

"Brighten up hyar an' look things squar'ly in the face," he exclaimed touching Roy's arm. "I'm doin' better nor you, boy, an' I've got a bullet somewhar in my life-box. Don't I know thet I'll never be able to face another grizzly, nor to out-jump the red-skins at their next big match on ther North Platte? I'm goin' under by this very wound; but not to-day nor to-morrow Roy—not till I've seen Gold Georgie at the end ov her trail! We'll git 'r back, Plumas, an' I'll see thet you stand a good show fur the whitest hand in Californy. Ther's no one ahead ov ye, boy, an' heaven knows thet I'm not yer rival. Me! Who'd think ov marryin' sech an' old mass ov ugliness ez Winch."

The boy looked at the old grizzly-fighter for a moment and then laid his hand on the great bronze palm that was ready to welcome it.

Plumas blushed to his temples at Old Winch's allusion to his love for Gold Georgie, and he tried to return a merry answer, but failed, and at last gave up in disgust.

"Never mind!" cried the rifleman. "You

won't be so frustrated when you an' the gal git together one ov these days. But we must be nigh the ranch by this time. Ef we don't find Ranch Rob at home, mebbe Red Star will take a notion to wait fur him."

"We are on his ranch now," answered the young miner, after surveying his surroundings a moment. "A short, brisk gallop would take us to his dwelling. Ranch Rob is the king of herders in this country. He visits Eldorado frequently, and his revolver has done some deadly work there."

"Oh, I know the rascal!" smiled Old Winch. "I was his hunter for six months, but that was long before he ever thought of comin' hyar an' settin' up in a style which he knew so well how to carry out. He didn't seem to recognize me when his horse knocked me down back in the pass, fur he didn't git Modoc's message, you know."

Old Winch was finishing his last sentence when Red Star, the Indian, leaped suddenly upright on his horse's back and looked far ahead.

"We are near the ranchero's big lodge," the chief said, turning to the two white men as he settled back into his old position again. "Red Star saw the top of it and the trees that surround it."

The next moment the horses were urged into a brisk gallop, and not long afterward the entire party, at a signal from the chief, drew rein at the edge of a little belt of timber from which they could look out upon the picturesque buildings of a California estancia.

The home of the ranchero stood in the midst of a valley well grassed and watered, and afforded a pleasing prospect to the eye.

Beyond the distant herds of cattle, the number of which approached thousands, and a score or more of horses that galloped hither and thither up and down the bank of a silvery creek, no signs of life were visible.

"Nobody at home!" ejaculated Plumas Roy. "We shall see, boy," replied Old Winch. "If you should be right, my word for it that Ranch Rob will come sneakin' back when he thinks we ain't on his track. Thar goes one red-skin forward to reconnoiter."

Well concealed in the belt of woodland from the view of anybody who might be on the lookout from the house, the enemies of the masked Mazeppa had sent a spy forward. The Indian was watched until he disappeared near the creek, and nothing more was seen of him until he suddenly and unexpectedly reappeared to the band among the trees.

"House empty," was his report. "The white ranchero no come back yet."

"I'm not surprised," said Old Winch. "We kin watch hyar, an' go forward an' catch 'im when he comes back. What are ye goin' to do, chief?"

"The big lodge shall be a trap for the white man when he comes," was the reply. "Come, bear-hunter."

A short gallop carried the ranchero's hunters across the space that intervened between the timber and the buildings, and in a short time the herder king's house was tenanted by his foes.

Their horses had been taken to the stables and stalled there, and the trap was set.

The sun approached the western horizon and the shadows grew long; but the watch was not given up.

"The hunted fox always comes back to his cave, Plumas," whispered Old Winch to the young miner who could not conceal the impatience that almost devoured him.

The sun sunk behind the distant mountains, the twilight deepened into night itself; the patient red-skins had not moved for three hours.

Suddenly Old Winch's hand fell upon Roy's wrist.

"Do you hear it, boy?" he said in the lowest of tones. "What did I say about ther fox comin' back to his hole?"

Plumas Roy listened for a moment and then almost sprang erect.

"A horse!" fell from his lips.

"Yes, our Mazeppa!"

The galloping of a steed was now distinctly heard, not only by Old Winch and Roy, but by the red watchers who cocked the revolvers they carried, and glided toward the porch that ran along the front of the building.

Nearer and nearer came the horse as yet unseen.

"Heavens!" suddenly exclaimed Roy, "Ranch Rob is not alone."

"A herd ov his hosses ar' followin' him," said Old Winch.

Three minutes later a man's voice was distinctly heard, and the occupants of the house knew that a horse had stopped before the porch.

"Hyar we ar'!" was the exclamation that followed the halt. "The old grizzly hunter s id thet Gold Valley would be stirred up afore many days, an' time sha'n't prove 'im a liar."

The last word was still sounding when somebody, wearing heavy boots, alighted on the porch.

Plumas Roy darted forward with an ejaculation of eagerness.

"I want to grasp the girl-stealer first! By Jove! I'll make him—"

He was jerked back by Old Winch, whose fingers seemed to cut into his flesh as he retained his hold.

"Great God! thet man isn't Ranch," said the grizzly hunter. "Let the Injuns find out who he is."

The savages had already cleared the threshold and were on the porch.

"Injuns!" grated the man there, as he whipped out two revolvers. "By thunder! this is a trap, and baited with Injun liver at thet. Hurry up, boys! Hyar's a chance fur a pic-nic."

He had retreated to the edge of the porch, where he faced the dozen Indians about to leap, panther-like, upon him.

A band of men were riding up at full gallop; they had answered their comrade's hail with loud shouts.

All at once the porch was lit up with the flashes of revolvers that the man thrust forward.

He had not waited for the red-skins to open the attack.

The Indians stood up to the work with a courage that would have been a credit to white men. The man at the edge of the porch reeled away shot through the brain, and in return for his death twenty mounted men were sweeping the porch from end to end with their deadly fire.

"Clean 'em out, boys! no quarter!" was the cry constantly heard as the firing went on. "The reddies hev finished Ranch, perhaps. We ar' his avengers!"

Safe from the bullets of the herder king's self-constituted avengers, Old Winch and Plumas Roy kept in the room where they had secreted themselves upon entering the building.

"It isn't our mix yet, boy," the grizzly hunter said, noticing how eager Roy was to help the Indians regardless of consequences. "Thar can't be an Injun left by this time. Ho! what war that?"

The old man's last words were called forth by the rush of a figure past them, and on through the room.

"Foller 'im! let none escape!" cried a loud voice, and the next minute the room swarmed with the desperadoes of Gold Valley, all in pursuit of the solitary living Indian who had sprung back into the house in order to make sure his escape.

"S'arch the room first!" said a voice so near Roy and his friend that they started.

"Foller me, boy," whispered the bear-hunter.

The twain crept along the wall toward the door that led to the porch; of course it stood wide open.

Old Winch was the first to put his foot across the threshold.

As he did so, a snap like the explosion of a cap greeted his ear and a lucifer flashed in his face.

"Hello! the old man an' Roy, his kid!" was the exclamation that fell from the giant in buckskin who held the match over his head.

"Yes, it's Old Winch!"

The grizzly hunter sprang forward like a tiger, and struck by the stock of his uplifted rifle the man with the match staggered back.

"Now, Roy, for ther hosses."

The short life of the little torch had revealed the steeds standing before the porch.

Old Winch bounded toward them, and Roy was at his heels when a hand fell upon his shoulder, whirled him around, and a voice hissed madly:

"A word—a move, an' yer brains 'll glisten in ther starlight, Plumas!"

"Not to-night, pard!"

With the four words rung out the thunderous report of a rifle fired by a man not ten feet away, and although blinded for a moment by the flash, Roy knew that his captor would never hiss his threat again.

The young miner did not lose a moment, but sprang toward Old Winch, his preserver,

and was soon seated in a saddle belonging to one of the tigerish citizens of Eldorado.

"It war a ticklish shot, Roy, fur I hed to shoot over yer shoulder," said Old Winch. "I reckon my eyes know their bizness when it comes to shootin'. Now we're off!"

The two horses dashed away, and the commotion behind them told the two men that they were not out of danger.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE SHADOW OF THE NOOSE.

"We ar' follered—don't you hear 'em?"

Old Winch need not to have spoken thus, for the youth riding at his side knew that the roughs of Gold Valley were following them at the utmost limit of their horses' speed.

It was a night chase through one of the most beautiful valleys of the Golden State.

Myriads of stars lit up the deep azure vault of the skies, and the horses bounded over the well-defined trail like the swift-limbed steeds of the gods.

"Ar' they gainin', Roy?"

"I can't tell."

"I think they ar'."

"Then let us leave the trail."

"Not jes' yet!"

A moment's silence followed.

"Do you know who I shot back thar on the porch?" suddenly asked Old Winch.

"No."

"It war Calaveras Nat, one ov the hounds thet left me in Starvation Camp. Jes' give me time," and the old man grated his teeth, "an' I'll settle the score with every last devil ov 'em. I've got to do it soon, Roy, fur I've already got my passport to eternity. Don't I owe 'em a grudge?" and the mad laugh that supplemented the grizzly hunter's sentence sent a shudder to his companion's heart.

Meanwhile the pursuers had not lost ground.

Swift as comets the horses flew over the wild road. Not a nerve was left unstrained, and every spur was covered with hot blood.

"Now's the time!" suddenly exclaimed Old Winch, guiding his horse to the left as his right hand clutched Roy's bridle. "We may hev to fight 'em ag'in, but I want to choose my ground."

They were in no path now, but were dashing across the valley, whose grass almost reached their steeds' knees.

A wild shout from the desperadoes of Eldorado told that the new departure had been discovered, and a few revolvers were fired just to tell the hunted men that the chase would not be relinquished.

"This doesn't look like finding Gold Georgie," muttered Plumas Roy to himself, as his thoughts reverted to the girl even at that fateful hour. "My opinion is that the Rifle King trusted too much to Red Star in this hunt for the masked Mazeppa, and not enough in his own judgment. I wonder if we are to continue this flight until somebody's horses break down? Winch?"

There was no reply.

All at once a wild exclamation pealed from Roy's throat.

The horse plunging along at his side was riderless!

Where was the old man?

During the youth's inattention for a moment, he had disappeared as quickly and effectually as if he had been shot upward among the stars.

Instinctively Roy reined in his steed, while Old Winch's horse plunged on.

He could not think of deserting the old grizzly hunter, who had probably fainted because of his wound, and fallen headlong from his saddle.

"He saved me awhile ago," said Roy, to himself. "He wouldn't desert me now if I had fallen instead of him. No! I will stay with him, come wlat may!"

Spite of the bloodthirsty men thundering down upon him, the courageous young miner turned his horse's head and confronted them.

"Halt!" he cried, as they came up and twenty revolvers shot toward him with twenty dark fingers at the triggers. "I am your prisoner, gentlemen, but I want it understood that I surrender because I want to help my companion."

"Whar is he?"

"Back yonder somewhere in the grass."

"Then he's beyond help, fur hev'n't we jes' thundered over the spot?"

Roy lost color. He had not thought of that.

"You may have missed him," he said, recovering hope. "Let us go back and see."

The men, who had struck a number of lucifers on their saddle-bows, exchanged suspicious glances.

"We'll keep the youngster hyar," said one, a man with whom Roy had been on rather friendly terms during his residence at Eldorado. "Ten ov you fellars go back an' look fur the old shooter. He may be healthy enough to hang. The boy hyar is, anyhow; we kin all swear to thet."

There was a retrograde movement by half of the band, and Roy followed them with wistful glances till their matches went out and their figures vanished from sight. He had not been disarmed. Why need he be deprived of his pistols when ten revolvers were ready to deprive him of life?

He was the prisoner of men whom he had known for several years—men by whose sides he had worked day after day in the Eldorado mines. He knew that they disliked him because he had not associated with them at all times, yet he had never quarreled openly with any one.

He was hated by them because he possessed a loftier nature and a mind fitted to adorn a better society than one usually finds among the camps of the gold region. The pigeon had fallen among the hawks; but there was one beak among them not yet ready to rend.

Roy suddenly felt a hand on his arm, and he turned his face to recognize the man who had just ordered the ten back to hunt for Old Winch.

"Don't let on thet you hear me, Roy," he said in a low whisper. "I don't want to see you go back to Ranch's house, fur ef you do all creation can't save ye. I'm goin' to propose to tie yer hands on yer back—I'll do the tyin' myself, but yer kin bet thet I'll fix ther ropes to suit you. A little jerk will loosen them, an' away you go ag'in. I'll give you the signal to make the break. I don't want to see you pulled up, boy, but if you go back to Ranch's, thet'll be a hangin' sure!"

Plumas Roy heard the rough through without once interrupting him, although he could hardly keep back the words that struggled for utterance.

"I can't desert Winch!" he said. "I would sooner go back to the ranch and take the chances!"

"Chances?" echoed the miner. "Thar'll be no chances."

"I'll go back anyhow."

Roy did not see the surprised look by which he was regarded.

"Don't be a fool, boy," he said in a tone that told the depths of the interest which the speaker had taken in him. "If Lasso Dan war in your fix, an' hed yer chances, he wouldn't think ov stayin' with an' old pard who might be lyin' dead in the grass. We've never been real friends, boy; I don't exactly know why, but we hev'n't. Let me fix the ropes. What d'ye say?"

Roy had weighed everything, and now resolutely shook his head.

Lasso Dan righted himself in the saddle, not only disappointed, but disgusted.

He had honestly, and from the bottom of a heart that knew few virtues, given Plumas Roy a chance for liberty; but the youth had rejected it.

Several moments later a shout came from the ten men who had been searching with flaming bunches of grass for Old Winch.

"Thet means 'come on,'" Lasso Dan said, addressing his companions. "They hev'n't found the old b'ar-hunter."

The men gathered up the lines which had been permitted to fall on the necks of their steeds, and started back toward the ranch.

"Once more, Roy," said a voice at the youth's ears. "Hedn't you better let me fix the ropes?"

The eyes of the two men met for a moment.

"For the last time I say no, Lasso," was the answer.

"I'm afraid it is fur the last time!"

These words sounded like the shutting of the doors of doom.

Lasso Dan had spoken truly when he said that the ten men had failed to find the old bear-hunter. This was confirmed when the two parties met.

"I fur one don't b'lieve the story 'bout the old 'un fallin' from his boss," suddenly exclaimed one of the desperadoes, addressing Lasso Dan, but at the same time throwing a sly glance at Roy. "If he war anywhar in the grass, we would hev found 'im."

The young miner turned full upon the speaker.

"It is true," he said. "Old Winch may have been dragged away from the stirrup, but I missed him suddenly—I did not see him fall—and I naturally thought, knowing him to be de-

perately hurt, that he had tumbled from the saddle. Why should I lie, when I have voluntarily given myself up?"

These words abashed his would-be accusers.

"We can't hunt for the old man—not now, at any rate," put in Lasso Dan at this juncture.

"For'ard to the ranch! Mebbe the rest ov the crowd hev caught the Injun thet broke back inter the house."

The horses started forward at a smart gallop, Roy being watched by more than half of the gang.

The ride back was devoid of incident.

Lasso Dan did not renew his offers of assistance. There was heart enough in the rough to regret that Roy had rejected them.

When the home of Ranch Rob was reached, torches were flashing on the porch and the exterior of the house, and the gaunt trees that fronted it were plainly revealed.

"We didn't get the Injun!" said a man, addressing Lasso Dan. "Somehow or other the red skunk got away; but, cap'n, I see you've brought back a fit subject fur the rope."

A loud, mad shout greeted the last words, and while it yet echoed over the scene, some one threw a lasso over a large limb that stretched toward the porch.

"Thet's for me," murmured Plumas Roy, interpreting the looks that now became fixed upon him. "Lasso Dan, I thank you for leaving me in possession of my revolvers."

It was more than evident that the young miner's hour was near at hand.

The roughs of Eldorado had resolved that he should die.

CHAPTER IX.

THE RED HELPER.

If the torches of the roughs of Gold Valley revealed the surroundings of the lynchers' court, their light did not show the animal-like object crouched in one of the forks of the death-tree about twenty feet above the fatal limb.

The light was so imperfect and weird among the thick golden foliage that the occupant of the fork really looked like a huge panther or mountain tiger, but in reality it was a man.

But his skin was red, and the greater part of his body wore no clothing of any kind.

In short, the tree was occupied by an Indian, who held in his red hand, while his snaky eyes looked down upon the lawless men under the limb, a cocked revolver, against the trigger of which rested an eager finger.

Who was the brave, and how came he to be crouched in the fork at that moment?

In a word, it was the red-skin who fled back into the ranchero's house when all his comrades had fallen before the pistols of the buckskin desperadoes.

He had eluded his maddened pursuers, for he gained the rear of the buildings in advance of their hands, and disappeared while they still thought he had not left the house.

Instead of keeping on and hastening toward the mountains, he fearlessly skirted one end of the house, suddenly reappeared in front and ascended the tree. It was, indeed, the safest covert he could find, for the roughs would never think of searching the tree for him when he had escaped by the rear of the house.

This Indian was no less a person than Red Star himself, the leader of the band whom Old Winch and Roy had accompanied to the ranch. He had miraculously escaped death during the battle on the porch. If blood trickled down his arm, dyeing his skin a deeper crimson, it was from a slight wound in the shoulder which was not worth looking after.

We may imagine that Red Star became an interested observer of the proceedings being conducted beneath the rope-encircled bough. He had recognized Plumas Roy, and with recognition a resolution to rescue him if possible rose in his breast.

"White boy too brave to die by rope," murmured the red-skin. "Him must live to help save pale girl from the talons of the king eagle—him shall live!"

Red Star left his fork and lowered his body several feet, then stretched himself along a limb directly above and within reach of the lynchers' rope.

How his eyes flashed as he eyed the swarthy crowd beneath him! Once or twice his gaze wandered to the motionless bodies of his braves lying on the porch, and then it would seek out the five figures on the ground side by side a few feet away.

Those forms told the story of the fierce little battle that had been decided in favor of the men of Gold Valley's capital.

"We can't stay hyar all night!" cried sev-

eral impatient men who were eager for the hanging. "Come, Lasso, order the youngster pulled up an' let us git away!"

Lasso Dan could give Roy no more time; the mad blood-cries forced him to turn to the youth.

His look said, "I offered you liberty, but you would not take it. I cannot save you now," but the young miner did not return a glance of regret. His eyes fell upon the two revolvers that had been permitted to remain in his belt, and remained there for a moment.

All at once he was pushed forward until he found himself directly under the noose that dangled over his head.

If he had cast his eyes upward at that moment, he might have seen the orbs that glittered amid the leaves; he might have caught sight of a dark hand from which protruded something very like the barrel of a navy.

"Give 'im a minute, thet's all he'll need!" shouted one of the men to whom Roy's eyes wandered while the sentence was still unfinished.

Lasso Dan stepped to his side.

"We will give you a minute, Roy," the captain of the Vigilants said.

At that moment the noose dropped over his head and rested on his shoulders.

"A minute to die in, eh?" muttered the youth. "I don't want a second when my time comes. Men of Eldorado, when you go to hang a fellow, be he boy or man, you should first deprive him of his revolvers. See! here are mine!"

The next instant Roy's weapons were jerked from his belt by his own hands, and the startled desperadoes instinctively recoiled.

"Ho! pull 'im up, you fellows at ther rope!" shouted a voice of command. "We kin soon choke his grip on ther killers!"

The four men who held the loose end of the cord sprung back for the purpose of drawing the youth up.

Roy's revolvers instantly covered them.

"Pull and die!" he flashed.

"Pull!" thundered Lasso Dan, the man who had offered mercy.

The rope tightened and then came the crack of the leveled revolvers, gripped by hands which no peril could unnerve.

Two of the men at the rope staggered back. The others dropped the cord and recoiled, as if such action would save their lives.

Still the Indian on the limb overhead did not stir. In his opinion, the time for action had not arrived. Simultaneously with the shots, both of which had proved death ones, the whole crowd had made a rush for Roy.

"He must hang men!" cried Lasso Dan, rushing among his crowd, and making desperate efforts to reach the menaced youth.

"Ov course, Lasso; we're not tryin' to hurt 'im!" was the response. "We war fools to let 'im keep ther killers. It hez cost us two more men, but ther rope will avenge 'em!"

In less time than we can pen a sentence, the gallant young miner found himself completely helpless and in the power of the swarthy cut-throats to whom mercy was unknown.

His pistols had been wrenched from his grasp; the two shots at the men at the rope were all he had been permitted to deliver.

"No shootin' this time, my young mountain cat!" was hissed in triumphant tones in his face.

"When we've settled with you, we'll go back an' hunt Old Winch till we pull him up an' leave him to the buzzards ov Gold Valley!"

In order that the hanging should proceed without further interruption, Roy's hands were bound to his side, and when four men sprung again to the cord and seized it, he gave himself up for lost.

Ah! The desperadoes, though they outnumbered him twenty to one, were afraid to let him have his pistols back; they dared not give him a fighting chance for his life.

"Up with him!" suddenly rung out Lasso Dan's voice. "It's good-by to Gold Valley forever this time, Roy."

Was it?

The doomed youth was leaving the ground. The accursed cord was choking him into insensibility—a mist swam before his eyes.

A loud shout from the throat of every human tiger before him rung in his ears. Was this the beginning of death?

At that moment something darted downward from among the leaves above the lynching limb. An object like a bowie-blade glittered for a second in the flashes of light that leaped up from the flaring torches, then Roy fell to the ground to the astonishment of all, while the men at the rope staggered back and fell in a heap!

"Hello! a broken rope!" exclaimed several at once. "Pick 'im up an' try ag'in. Bring out another lasso! He can't break 'em all!"

Not the rope had not broken, the knife of the red-skin in the tree had cut it through by a single sweep of his crimson hand!

Fast upon this unexpected accident came the ringing crack of the deadly navy, and the men of Eldorado fell back from Plumas Roy, some alive, others with holes in the tops of their skulls!

"Thar's a devil in the tree!" was the cry that rose on every side.

Lasso Dan recoiled, spite of his well-known bravery; his followers had already fallen back.

The figure of a human being dropped through the smoke and alighted beside Roy who was regaining his feet without assistance.

In one instant his bonds were severed, and he looked into the face of his helper, Red Star, the Indian chief.

"Come!" said the red-skin. "White man an' Red Star must stand together. If one falls the other must go down, eh, brother?"

"I am with you, chief," was Roy's response. "The men of Eldorado have fallen back. The present moment is our time."

Without reply Red Star sprang straight toward the porch to which the roughs of Gold Valley had fled, nonplused and mystified by the death-shots from the tree.

"An Injun, by Jove!" cried Lasso Dan. "Give the pards all the cold lead you hev, boys. It mayn't be hangin', but it'll be death all ther same."

At that moment Roy and his companion placed a number of horses between them and the men tigers of the mining capital.

"Mount, brother, but don't ride like white man," ordered Red Star.

The couple leaped upon the backs of the nearest horses, but held to the manes and stretched their bodies along the animal's sides and necks. No command to dash away was needed.

The roughs were themselves again, and were springing forward with their revolvers.

Away went the two friends to the sharp cracks of a score of revolvers, the balls from which, intended for their bodies, whistled harmlessly around their ears.

To their surprise the rest of the horses thundered along at their heels, thus leaving Lasso Dan and his braves without means for pursuit.

"Let 'em come, brother!" ejaculated Red Star, looking into Roy's face after surveying the riderless steeds for a moment. "The wolves of the valley will have to trail us on foot," and a triumphant grin appeared at the Indian's mouth.

On, on, down the trail he had lately traveled with the Rifle King, Plumas Roy pressed at the top of his new steed's speed, and within touching distance of the bravered-skin chief who rode at his side.

"Red Star, I thank you for this," fell from the young miner's lips when he drew rein five miles from the scene of this exciting rescue. "I never did you a favor that merited such a gallant rescue."

"No, brother; but Red Star wanted his brother to live for the pale girl he will find by and by."

Roy started.

"I am to hunt her alone, chief. Old Winch has left me—"

"But Red Star is near!" was the interruption. "When the white youth forgets that Red Star hates the ranchero, let him forget that he loves the white flower."

"I will not forget," Roy said, laying his hand upon the Indian's naked arm. "This night you have linked me to you with a chain of friendship and devotion which naught but death can sever."

"Red Star knew that."

The horses which had dashed after the escaping pair had turned back as if conscious that they were not following Lasso Dan, whose saddle was now filled by the youthful miner.

Red Star and Roy were alone in the midst of the beautiful valley that stretched, grass clad, to the foot of the Sierra Nevada.

They could plainly see each other's figures, for the stars were shining with unusual brilliancy, and when they moved on again it was slowly, as if they did not fear pursuit.

It was a gallant rescue, and a narrow escape; but the end was not yet.

CHAPTER X.

DEALING WITH A TRAITOR.

FIFTEEN miles away lay Eldorado, and five behind them stood Lasso Dan and his discomfited crowd.

Roy and the chief knew Gold Valley well;

they had traversed it at all hours, under the stars as well as beneath the glare of the noonday sun.

Thoughts of the Old Rifle King and Gold Georgie, but especially of the latter, were uppermost in the young man's mind.

If he could but strike the masked Mazeppa's trail he would ask no other favor at Fortune's hands.

Red Star had failed in the object which took him to the herder's ranch after the capture of the bear-hunter's *protégée* in the pass. He knew, as Plumas Roy did now, that the masked Mazeppa really was Ranch Rob himself. Indian vengeance had tied him to the back of his wildest horse, but the fortune which sometimes comes to the aid of human devils had interposed in the robber ranchero's behalf.

Roy was eager to go back to the pass and strike the herder king's trail; but Red Star would not listen to such a proposition.

A thirst for further vengeance against the men of Eldorado burned in the red-skin's breast. He would have ridden back to the ranch to try conclusions with them once more. He was constantly tortured and maddened by thoughts of the twelve braves he had left on the porch; the dead white men under the trees failed to fill the cup of revenge.

If the twain riding slowly through the starlit valley had retraced their steps, they might have reached the *estancia* in time to witness a sight that would have delighted them.

The roughs of the valley were still cursing their discomfiture and the loss of their steeds, which had not yet returned, when a single horseman drew rein in front of the house.

A loud shout greeted him, and he was instantly surrounded by the torches that revealed his flashing eyes and strangely yellow face.

"Ranch Rob, by Jehosaphat!" exclaimed Lasso Dan. "What on earth makes yer face so yaller? Ye hev'n't been tryin' ter make a Mexican out ov yerself, hev ye?"

"I haven't, but a lot of cursed Injuns have!" was the response. "What meant all the shooting I heard awhile ago? In the name of Tartarus! who did all that?" and the arm of the speaker designated the red-men and white lying where they had fallen before the deadly revolver.

In a few words Lasso Dan told all.

"And Red Star, the chief demon of them all, got away?" grated the man on horseback, and then he added: "I'm glad of that! I wouldn't have him lying yonder for all the gold in California. You don't know what I have endured. You couldn't stop my horse when he took me through the camp yesterday?"

An exclamation of surprise fell from every tongue.

"Then you war the masked man?" cried Lasso Dan. "If we hed known that, cap'n—"

"Never mind, boys; the more I suffered the deeper grew my hate—my desire for vengeance! I'm glad you didn't check me, although if you had, those boys wouldn't be thar with their faces turned up to the stars. It was Red Star that dyed my face a dirty yellow which no water can ever wash out; but what of that? I can hate and hunt my enemies just the same! His accursed fingers fastened the dark mask to my face; but what if they did? I can see again, and I shall pay him back! Bury your dead, boys, and toss the Injuns down the walls of the gulch beyond the gnarled trees; then come back and let us organize for the fiend's own vengeance."

Ranch Rob looked strange with his dark, yellowish face and white hands. His eyes fairly flashed while he spoke, and his voice sounded like the hiss of a serpent.

"So you couldn't find Old Winch, eh?" he said, his thoughts recurring to the Rifle King. "I don't believe him dead. He never fell from the horse if the young chap does think so. I knew him the moment I set eyes on him in the pass. Time hasn't changed him since we left him to the grizzlies in Starvation Camp. Hal ha! Where's Modoc?"

Lasso Dan and his crowd exchanged glances.

"He's dead—I know it!" declared the herder.

"Dead he is—shot by Old Winch," Lasso assured.

"For tying four knots years ago, I expect," and the ranchero smiled.

"Well, there'll be other other knots tied before the old man's time comes."

Ranch Rob was a handsome man, spite of the dye that had altered his complexion. Tall, when standing erect, with limbs of the practiced athlete, and the strength of a giant, he was, physically, one of nature's finest.

Encircling his wrists were raised welts of

crimson—mementoes of his wild ride as the masked Mazeppa. If he had stripped to the waist, the men by whom he was at that moment surrounded would have started at the sights they would have beheld.

Red Star had indeed fastened his white enemy to the horse securely, and when he sent the spirited beast snorting away, he confidently thought that he had seen the animal for the last time.

But the white herder was alive to hunt him—alive to inflict a vengeance compared to which the role of Mazeppa would be mercy itself.

If Ranch Rob had appeared at the *estancia* alone, where was his captive Old Winch's *protégée*?

He did not mention her to the roughs of Gold Valley. If she was still in his power he was keeping the secret to himself.

He dismounted during the burial of the members of the band, and entered the house.

His walk was not steady; the cutting lassoes had done their work, and his limbs had not resumed their suppleness.

"Twelve out of thirteen!" fell from his lips as he looked at the red corpses that strewed the porch. "I'm glad, as I told the boys, that the thirteenth red-skin escaped. Vengeance has already decreed that he shall fall into my hands. Ah! Red Star, your doom shall be worse than the one you marked out for me. After that I will bring my new mistress to the ranch!"

Georgie, then, was somewhere where he could lay his hands upon her when he wanted her!

Gold Valley boasted of many ranches smaller than his, and their owners—some dark fellows with Mexican blood in their veins, others native Californians—were his friends.

Might he not have left his captive in the care of one of those rancheroes?

At any rate, according to his resolution, Old Winch's ward was to be queen of the ranch some day.

But let us follow Ranch Rob.

His dwelling was large enough for the residence of twenty persons; but he had been its sole occupant for several years.

He passed through the room where Red Star and his companions had waited for his return, and ascended to another almost directly above it. This apartment looked out upon a small grove of trees behind the house. A slanting roof ran from the window-sill to within ten feet of the ground. It was touched by the limits of the nearest trees.

The interior of the room was quite dark, but the ranchero soon illumined it with the rays of a lamp which he found on a rough table. It was evidently his sleeping apartment for a low cot stood in one corner, and a suit of showy ranchero garments hung against the wall.

"If I can't Americanize my face, I can transform myself into a Mexican entirely," he exclaimed, and a moment later he was donning the garments as rapidly as possible.

The change did not occupy five minutes.

Ranch Rob sprang to the small mirror that hung over the stand, and catching up the lamp, surveyed his figure by its aid as best he could.

He had nearly completed the inspection when the rapid galloping of a horse came in at the open window.

"What does that mean?" he ejaculated. "That horse is coming from the west—from toward Red Carlos's *estancia*."

He was at the window listening to the sounds growing more distinct with each waning moment.

"Santissima! Is it you, cap'n?" exclaimed the Mexican's voice as the horse stopped under the trees whose limbs touched the roof below the herder's window.

"Carlos, as I expected!" grated the ranchero. "Something has happened. The traitor has come to me with an excuse and a lie!"

Then he shouted aloud:

"It is I, Carlos. Come up and be quick about it, for you have news."

There was no response, and the ranchero turned as if he was expecting to see the messenger reach the room, as he had done by the stair. But instead of gaining it by that route, the man below had swung himself upon the sloping roof by means of the trees, and was coming toward the window from that direction.

Captain Rob turned when he heard the voice behind him.

He fixed his eyes on a dwarfish, treacherous-looking Mexican, whose dark, almost Indian, face had gained for him the name of Red Carlos.

"Well, what is it?" demanded Rob, as the man reached the window.

"The senorita has run away, cap'n!" was the reply.

"Gold Georgie—gone!" gasped the herder, as his hand darted at the Mexican's throat. "Traitor, why didn't you stay away and not be the bearer of your own double dealing?"

"By the Virgin, cap'n—"

"Enough! A thousand oaths wouldn't save you! The girl gone, eh? Her beauty captivated you, and you have hidden her. Never mind! I will find her, Carlos, but you will never prove false again!"

A revolver was presented to the Mexican's gaze. He recoiled with a cry, but the ranchero's arm was the length of his tether.

A second later a loud report followed the pressing of a trigger, and the human figure that fell from the Mazepa's merciless hands rolled down the roof and dropped to the ground.

If Red Carlos was a traitor, he had betrayed his last trust.

"I might have forced a confession from his lips, but who could have believed it?" muttered the ranchero as he turned away. "If he has concealed my prize his slaves shall unearth her for me. I was a fool for trusting the traitor, but he is out of my way forever."

With a glance at the blood-stains on the window sill, and placing a fresh cartridge in the heated chamber, the slayer left the room.

CHAPTER XI.

PEDRO THE MERCILESS.

CAPTAIN ROB had discovered, when too late, that some men could be trusted too far.

If Red Carlos, the man who lay dead under the trees with a bullet in his brain, had come to him with a well coined lie about Gold Georgie's escape, one thing was certain—he would never deceive again.

Relying on the assertion that thieves are true to their mates, the ranchero had borne Old Winch's *protegee* to Red Carlos's estancia after his success in the little pass. He feared that it would not be safe to take her at once to his own ranch, for Red Star and his band, with the old grizzly hunter and Roy, would be likely to beat him to the place, where they would doubtless lie in wait for him.

Red Carlos's estancia lay fifteen miles distant from his own grazing grounds, near enough to recover Gold Georgie within a short time when he should want her. But now the girl had escaped, so the traitor said, and he had to inaugurate a quest which might interfere with other plans lately formed.

"The girl first," he said to himself, as he reached the ground floor of his dwelling. "The more I think about the affair the more confident I become that the little Mexican died with a lie on his lips. His peons, or slaves, shall divulge her hiding-place at the revolver's muzzle. Gold Georgie is a pearl worth winning. She looks like the Diamond of Sonoma did when she was the beauty of the mountain camp. Her eyes always flash when they regard me, and she shrinks whenever I touch her. But never mind, my beauty. I will win and wear in the end. This love affair of mine will have a pleasanter ending than the other one did," and the ranchero ended his prediction with a laugh as he stepped upon the porch.

His own horse stood where he had left it, and near by stood a number of steeds belonging to the men of Eldorado, the most of whom were at that moment giving sepulture to their comrades.

Ranch Rob knew that instead of pursuing the trio from the mining camp, the roughs had made their way to his ranch, for a terrible suspicion relative to the identity of the masked Mazepa had entered the heads of several. If they had found him at home the whole band would have hunted Old Winch and his friends with cocked pistols and ready ropes.

"Hello, cap'n!" exclaimed a man who sprung forward from the group of horses as the ranchero reached his own steed's side, and put one foot into the broad wooden stirrup. "Ye'r not goin' off afore the boys git through with the buryin', ar' ye?"

Rob recognized the man.

"I am going off," he said, "but not for long. Daylight will find me back here. If you want to stay—"

"Stay! Lasso Dan's not one ov ther stayin' kind when thar's several hangin's in prospect," was the response.

"Who are you going to hunt?"

"Red Star, the old b'ar-fighter, ef he's livin', an' the boy."

"Not the Injun! he belongs to me!" said the ranchero firmly. "You will tell Lasso when he comes up—I can't stay to see him myself—that

I will call to account the man or men who sheds that red-skin's blood. You fellows can deal with Old Winch and the boy; I don't care about them; but the Injun is my man—mine only!"

The lips of the herder king met firmly behind the last word, and his eyes gave emphasis to his sentences.

"I'll tell Lasso, cap'n, but—"

"But what? Out with it!"

"It'll be hard to hold ther boys off ef they should git Red Star in a tight place."

Captain Rob looked like a man ready to burst with rage. He seemed about to give utterance to some violent language, but restrained himself, and answered in a milder tone.

"You will tell Lasso what I have said," he said, addressing the representative of Eldorado's lawlessness, and then touched his horse with the spurs, and was off before the listener could reply.

"Lasso Dan's a man of judgment," he muttered. "If the message is faithfully delivered there'll be no trouble between us; but I shall keep my resolution, for that Indian belongs to me just as much as if I had purchased him of a lawful owner. Vengeance has given him to me, and woe to the man who attempts to cancel the debt which nobody has a right to pay but Ranch Rob!"

To the man who watched him the masked Mazepa soon disappeared.

His route led him across his beautiful *estancia*, and the stars showered their wealth of golden light upon him, but the bewitching splendor of the night had no delights for him.

The fifteen miles that stretched between his lands and the smaller but well stocked ranch of Red Carlos, were soon traveled over, and he at last drew rein before a little house along whose entire front stretched a porch where Red Carlos was wont to enjoy his cigarettes after a new purchase, or a successful raid, for it was said that the little Mexican was not much annoyed by conscientious scruples.

The dwelling at first seemed deserted, but after a minute's inspection from his saddle, Ranch Rob detected a glimmer of light beyond one of the windows.

Without a word he dismounted and let his animal stand with the reins thrown carelessly upon his neck, while he himself glided across the porch, revolver in hand, and his eyes fastened upon the window.

An attempt to look into the room beyond through the rent in the greasy curtain proved a signal failure, so the ranchero crept to the door near by and listened.

He heard the coarse voices of several vaqueros mingled with the clinking of tin cups; he could see nothing.

"They're just drunk enough to fight," he said to himself; "but I am here on business. They must tell me what they know about Gold Georgie. I recognize the voice of Big Pedro, the little Mexican's right-hand man. He knows everything."

The next moment the ranchero put his shoulder against the door and forced it open.

As it fell inward four men leaped up from a rough table in the middle of a room, and sprung back with exclamations of astonishment, and revolvers drawn and cocked.

"No shooting till we understand each other!" said Captain Rob, straightening up and displaying two ready navies, one in each hand. "Your lives hang on your own lips and not on the droppers in my hands. I am here on business—business that we ought to be able to transact without bloodshed."

The ranchero paused and fixed his eyes on the man who appeared from his size and looks to be the leader of the gamblers.

This was the fellow he had called Big Pedro before entering the room.

He stood six feet in his rough boots; he was broad-shouldered, dark-skinned, evil-eyed—in short, a giant in physique, a cunning devil, a man-tiger, in looks.

"Where Senor Carlos?" he asked of the ranchero, in a voice that betrayed his mixed lineage.

"I am the questioner—not you!" was the quick response. "Now listen to me—where is the girl?"

The four men exchanged quick glances; then a strange twinkle lit up the depths of the swarthy giant's eyes.

"La senorita run off, senor capitan," he answered.

"That's what the other liar stuck to to his cost," retorted the ranchero, fiercely. "I didn't come here for a continuation of the falsehood. I want the truth—the truth or blood! Do you hear that?"

"We hear that, senor; but the little senorita did get away from Capitan Carlos."

"Tell me about it."

"You see, senor, Capitan Carlos him git pretty full of liquor; then he go to la senorita's room an' brag about his estate. The girl told him she no b'lieve he have so many manes or so many horns. Him sware by the Virgin that he has, and then he invites la senorita to ride out with him to look at his stock."

"The idiot!" hissed the ranchero. "When I told him to give the bird no string he must escort her round his ranch. Go on, Pedro."

"Well, la senorita ready to go, ov course, so Capitan Carlos hav' the big white mustang fetched to the door an' helps her on. Away they go."

"Alone?"

"Alone, senor. By'mby Capitan Carlos him come back all over mad, an' swear that la senorita give him the slip. We mount an' go with him to the place, an', sure enough, we see that the big white mustang carry girl off toward the mountain. No foolin' this time, senor. Capitan Carlos did not lie."

Ranch Rob could not discredit the giant's story. Although it had not been spun in elegant language, it did not fail to impress him with its truthfulness. His thoughts went back to the man he had adjudged a traitor and slain.

"Carlos knew better than to act as he did," he exclaimed. "After all, if he was no traitor, he got his deserts."

"Where is Capitan Carlos?" suddenly asked Big Pedro.

"At my house. He will never come back. Senors, this estancia is yours."

"Carlos is dead, then?"

"He is dead!"

Big Pedro's eyes did not flash, but his lips met firmly behind his last word.

"He came to me with the cloak of treachery on his shoulders," continued the ranchero. "I saw that he was glad that the girl escaped from his hands. Senors, I am going away. Stay here and enjoy yourselves. This estancia, with all its hoofs and horns, belongs to you!"

The three men who stood behind the giant uttered exclamations of satisfaction, but Pedro himself did not unseal his lips.

"The giant isn't satisfied. I must watch him," flashed across the ranchero's mind. "I didn't do him a service when I dropped Red Carlos. The others do not care."

At that moment Big Pedro stepped forward, picked up a tin cup brimming full of liquor, and extended it to the ranchero.

"Drink, capitan," he said. "We are going to part. Drink peace to the soul of Capitan Carlos."

"Certainly, I can do that," said Ranch Rob, and a moment later he had drained the cup to the sparkling of the giant's evil eyes.

"Now I'm off! Take care of the estancia, senors. There's gold in its thousands of hoofs and horns. Carlos the Red will not rise to dispossess you. I will find my prize, but one of you must show me the trail."

"Benz will go, capitan," said Big Pedro.

One of the peons stepped briskly forward and joined the ranchero. His was the most honest face in the group, and Ranch Rob approved of the giant's selection.

A brief time sufficed to place a saddled steed beside the ranchero's, and the two men rode away. They did not see the eager bound that carried Big Pedro across the little room, nor hear the vengeful threat that fell hissing from his lips:

"There may be two dead capitans in California, senor, when the sun comes up," he exclaimed, whirling upon his associates with a coiled lasso in his swarthy hands. "A life for a life. Sacristima! The blood of Capitan Carlos burns Pedro's tongue. Come, senors, or stay with the liquor till I come back."

A stride took the half-breed giant to the door, and a few bounds to the estancia's stables.

When he appeared again in the starlight, he was mounted on a dark horse, and carried the lasso at his saddle bow.

The two men left behind at the house had not followed him.

Away went the big fellow in the direction taken by Ranch Rob and the *vaquero*, or guide. He looked like an avenger—like one of those tireless trackers to be found among the wild hills of the Mexican States.

It was not long before Ranch Rob turned in his saddle and looked at his companion.

"Hark!" he said. "A horse!"

Benz turned his head toward the house and listened with a significant smile at the corners of his mouth.

"I hear a horse, capitan, but it is riderless," he said.

"Say you so, Benz?" exclaimed the ranchero. "I am not so certain about that. Stir at your peril. The hand that slew the master is not afraid to kill his slave."

Benz gave the speaker a look, which had to pass over the glittering barrel of a leveled revolver.

The sound of the approaching hoofs grew more distinct, and Ranch Rob was straining his eyes through the night to catch a glimpse of the animal rapidly coming up.

"By Jove! you're right, Benz. The horse has no rider!" fell suddenly from his lips. "He's going to pass us on the left. There he goes!"

Both men now saw the steed which had come in sight, and was dashing past on their left, although within a lasso's cast.

All at once, and while Ranch Rob still eyed the animal, a man rose on his back, and the next instant a noose settled down over his (the ranchero's) shoulders.

A mad curse and a start was the reply. Then the ranchero was jerked from his saddle.

A shout of triumph burst from the guide's throat. It brought Ranch Rob to his feet.

"Traitor, take that," he hissed, and from the flash of his revolver Benz, the traitor, reeled and fell from his steed.

"I'm ready for you now!" he grated, whirling upon the lasser; but at that moment he was jerked from his feet, and a laugh of revenge and victory sounded in his ears.

He knew that he had fallen into the hands of one who was called sometimes Pedro, the Merciless.

"Never mind, I'm not weaponless!" said the ranchero. "I've been in tighter places than this in my life. Come on, villain, and let me give you a bullet that itches to pierce your heart."

Ranchero Rob lay amid the yielding grass that covered the rich pasture ground, ready, eager to confront the man who had lassoed him.

The lasso had tightened around his body, pinioning his arms to his side, but he was confident that he could use his revolvers with effect on any enemy who dared to approach him.

But no one came up.

Suddenly something red like the lantern of a will-o'-the-wisp danced before his eyes.

It grew larger, and he watched it until all his doubts vanished.

"Great God! Pedro the Merciless doesn't belie his name!" fell from his lips in accents of horror. "Unless I can escape from this accursed coil, I am doomed. The fiend has fired the grass!"

CHAPTER XII.

FROM FIRE TO FLAME.

THE ranchero's situation was appalling!

When he attempted to spring to his feet the lasso tightened, and he was jerked rudely back again. He doubted not that Pedro the Merciless was at the other end of the infernal cord.

"Advance upon me, demon!" he shouted aloud. "Ah! you dare not face the man you have entrapped. I am helpless, weaponless and yet you keep aloof, coward that you are."

There was no reply, and Ranch Rob did not waste any more words on one who must have heard yet would not answer.

He could see that the flame which at first had appeared no larger than the light of a lucifer, was fast becoming a raging and devouring fire.

The tongues of crimson leaped above the grass like serpents, and the wind was blowing in his face.

The horse ridden by Benz, the avenger's confederate, had galloped off, but the ranchero's steed had not deserted him.

With distended nostrils and fiery eyes the animal stood almost within touch of his master's hands, and eyed alternately the burning grass and the men on the ground.

Where was Pedro the Merciless?

If Ranch Rob could have looked through the black smoke, and over the top of the fire, he would have seen the author of his peril.

Standing beside the horse that had carried him to the spot, the little Mexican's avenger watched with dancing orbs the progress of the red destroyer.

"Pedro hears the ranchero, but he will not answer," he murmured when Ranch Rob had ceased to taunt him. "He will never shoot another man who leaves to him the truth which he calls a lie. Sacristima! he will squirm like a serpent when the fire touches him!"

Pedro, the Merciless, as we have just seen,

was not at the lasso. The cord was fastened to a sharpened stick forced into the yielding ground, so that when the caught ranchero attempted to rise, it would tighten and throw him again.

"A man must fight to the last!" grated Ranch Rob. "If Pedro, the Merciless, will not come to me, I will go to him!"

Believing that the giant held the end of the cord which he could not see, he clutched his revolvers with a firmer grip, and began to creep toward the spot.

His horse followed him, as if there was a bond of affection between man and beast, which only death could dissolve.

The fire was continually approaching. If the grass had been entirely dry, and a strong wind to fan the flames, Ranch Rob would never have reached the end of the lasso alive.

Fully expecting a death-grapple with his enemy, the ranchero was eager to get to the end of the cord.

The whole scene was now revealed by the glare of the billowy sea of crimson that rolled toward him. His crawl, while it was full of desire, became cautious. Pedro, the Merciless, might be waiting for him.

At last he reached the end of the rope, and found instead of the giant—a stake!

"Curse me! why didn't I find this stick sooner!" he exclaimed, as he threw himself forward and pulled it up. "The villain has ridden off and abandoned me to my fate. Ah! there will come a day or a night of retribution for the fiend. He has added a new enemy to my list."

While he spoke the ranchero was loosening the lasso which he did not fling aside but appropriated as he turned to the one faithful friend—his horse.

"You can outrun a fire, Meza!" he exclaimed, throwing himself into the saddle. "Now take me away, and help me to live for vengeance. Benz didn't get to show me Gold Georgie's trail, but never mind. We'll find the pearl of Gold Valley, and come out on top yet. The yellow fiend is riding off confident that among the crumbling grass when the flames had passed on, will lie only the bones of Ranch Rob. Never was man so terribly deceived before!"

The herder king could hardly repress a wild cry of victory when he found himself being carried swiftly over the ground in advance of the fire. He looked back more than once and saw the whole valley in flames. Hundreds of rancheros would curse the hand that fired the grass, and on the morrow the sun would rise upon a scene of desolation.

The ranchero's steed was an animal of acknowledged swiftness; but his greatest efforts were not required to keep his master ahead of the flames. He bore him across the doomed pasture lands, nor felt a rein drawn until the lofty foot-hills of the Sierra Nevada hid the flames, but not the spark-kissed sky.

"Here we are, Meza, safe and sound without a hair singed!" cried Ranch Rob, smoothing his steed's heated neck. "Let me see, where are we?" and he looked up at the towering trees and the sloping sides of the hills that surrounded them.

He knew almost exactly where he was, for the mountains that looked down upon Gold Valley were as familiar to him as the trails of his own ranch. But it was night, and his surroundings were likely to prove deceptive.

"We'll go on," he said, addressing his horse, which he now urged forward again. "If I am not mistaken, this path leads to a spot we have frequently visited, Meza. We went through it when I was strapped to a horse's back. I am going there in a better condition now."

The horse was now urged into a gallop, and Ranch Rob was emerging into a little basin, when a man's voice greeted his ears.

"Hello, thar, stranger! I wish ye'd stop, fur I don't like ter shoot, although I expect ye'r a feller what richly deserves killin' like the most ov mankind in Gold Valley."

The first three words made Ranch Rob draw rein, and while the speaker continued, he leaned forward with his fingers at the triggers of his revolvers.

"Who are you?" he demanded, catching a glimpse of a human figure among the mountain bushes perhaps twenty yards away.

"That's no secret. I'm Old Winch!" was the response.

An exclamation of amazement fell from the ranchero's lips.

"Kind o' surprises you, eh?" the old bear hunter went on. "Mebbe you've heard how I tumbled from my boss, down in ther valley, an' war dragged away danglin' from ther stirrup.

I've hed many queer adventures in my time, but thet one I wouldn't hev repeated fur all ther claims in Californy. I'm hyar, though pretty nigh used up, but ready for bizness all ther same. I know you."

"Hal!"

"I hev'n't heard yer voice fur a long time, but I hev'n't furgot it. Don't I recollect how you ordered the boys ter lash me to ther tree the day you broke camp away up in northern Californy? You didn't git the Diamond ov Sonoma, Ranch Rob, but ye've done better with the gal. Whar is she?"

Captain Rob had by this time seen that Old Winch held a rifle against his shoulder, and that he was talking over the barrel.

"From Pedro the Merciless to Old Winch—curse the change!" grated the ranchero to himself. "I can't hoodwink a man who has cause to hate me, if any man living has. I must get out of this scrape as best I can, or the victim of Starvation Camp will complete his revenge."

He looked at the old grizzly-fighter again.

"I am Ranch Rob—the man you've been looking for ever since that day," he confessed. "You've recognized me already. Now shoot and cancel the debt of blood!"

"Thet's not fur me to do, Ranch," was the answer, and the man among the bushes advanced, but unsteadily. "You hev'n't answered my question: Whar's Gold Georgie?"

"You would not follow me?"

"Try me!"

A strange gleam was in the depths of the ranchero's eyes which were fastened on Old Winch.

Did he read in the old man's unsteady step and unnatural look signs of approaching death?

The Old Rifle King stood at his horse's head, and was eying him with his piercing eagle orbs.

"Where's your horse?" asked the ranchero.

"Ready fur me," was the answer. "You will take me to Georgie?"

"Yes."

"Fool me, Rob—play me false, an' the buzzards ov Gold Valley will find you dead to-morrow."

It was a threat which Old Winch would not hesitate to carry into instant execution at the first sign of treachery.

"I am ready," the ranchero resumed, still regarding the old man.

A peculiar call by the hunter brought a horse forward, and after two attempts he seated himself in the saddle.

"He's a dying man!" ejaculated the ranchero in an undertone. "That ride at the stirrup has nearly finished him. I will complete the work at the first opportunity."

"Go ahead, Ranch," ordered Old Winch as he fell in behind the hunter whom he watched closely while he held his cocked rifle in his hands. "Don't furgit the buzzards thet'll sail above Gold Valley when the sun comes up again."

The ranchero vouchsafed no reply, but sent his horse forward with a light touch of the spurs.

The fierce eyes of Old Winch did not leave him for a moment.

"I've got 'im now!" he hissed. "The fool will take me to Gold Georgie an' thar the gal's trail will end. What ef he knowed thet she war ther Diamond's child? If he war aware ov thet, he'd stop his boss an' we'd hev to shoot it out hyar."

The next moment the flash of a revolver leaped from the dim starlight ahead, and the man on the foremost horse sprang erect in his stirrups with a loud cry, and pitched forward over his steed's ears!

"Who did that?" yelled Old Winch. "Let the coward who bez cheated Gold Georgie out ov her man show his carcass, if he dares!"

There was no response.

CHAPTER XIII.

AT THE HEELS OF HIS OWN HORSE.

OLD WINCH repeated question and challenge, but the person who had shot the ranchero without warning neither replied nor showed himself.

"The shooter's a coward!" grated the grizzly-hunter. "He's afraid to face an old man whose life lease bez about expired!" And as there was still no answer, he moved forward and bent over the ranchero.

A glance told him that the shot had not proved fatal for the Mazepa of Gold Valley was staring into his face, and a grim smile was visible at the corners of his mouth.

"I'm hard to kill, you see!" he exclaimed. "I don't think the red-skin drew a drop of blood."

"The red-skin!" echoed the Rifle King, his eyes dilating. "Then—"

"I saw the red devil a second before he fired, but not in time to prevent the shot, although I dodged as quickly as possible," continued Ranch Rob. "I didn't expect to find him here, but in Gold Valley one's enemies are constantly turning up. Didn't you see him?"

"If I had, that would be a corpse up yonder jes' now," said the rifleman. "That's blood alongside ov yer head, Ranchero, but only a few drops."

"Better a few drops than a bullet in the brain pan, eh, Winch?" laughed the ranchero.

"Sartainly, I'm mighty glad that the Injun didn't wipe you out, Ranchero. If I had caught a glimpse of the red Greaser—"

"You would have shot him?"

"Yes."

Ranch Rob, who had now regained his feet, rejoiced that his would-be slayer had not accomplished his purpose, gave Old Winch a strange look.

"I don't know about that," he said. "Would you have shot Red Star?"

Old Winch recoiled.

"I thought I'd startle you, ha, ha!" cried the ranchero. "Your red friend tried to take my life. You would not have shot him."

"I would! I would!" was the reply. "No Injun livin' hez a right to kill you, Ranchero. So ther skunk was Red Star, eh? Wal, I didn't expect him byar, nor at this bizness; but then he doesn't know—"

The bear-hunter checked himself, and turned toward the horses.

"We war goin' to Gold Georgie," he continued, glancing at the ranchero. "Red Star will not attempt his sneakin' trick ag'in, even if he finds out that he failed, fur he knows that I am with you. To the gall that's the bizness before us now."

To remount and ride forward again was the work of a minute.

"If ther shooter war Red Star, mebbe Roy isn't fur off," thought Old Winch. "I'd like to hev him around now, fur that bullet in my life-box ar' gittin' in its work. I feel the monster at my heart-strings. I promised to see Georgie to the end ov her trail, an' I must do it. Grit yer teeth, an' sw'ar to go ahead, Winch!"

With this determined resolve the brave old Rifle King kept on with his keen eyes riveted upon the man who rode a short distance ahead.

The reader knows that Ranch Rob was ignorant of Gold Georgie's whereabouts. She had escaped from Red Carlos to whom he had consigned her for safe-keeping, and he was now conducting the wounded man deeper among the mountains, ready and eager to whirl upon him at the first opportunity and sweep him from his path.

Old Winch was a dangerous enemy, and the sooner he was put out of the way the better.

More than once during the lonely advance the ranchero looked over his shoulder to see his follower, and to note that his rifle was cocked and ready to be discharged at a second's warning.

"Now's my time!" suddenly said Ranch Rob to himself. "I can't deceive the old fellow much longer. I haven't an idea where the girl is, and he will find that out soon. Therefore, I might as well bring matters to a crisis."

As he finished he leaned over as if a trivial accident, such as the slipping of a girth, had happened.

"Curse the girth!" he growled in tones intended for Old Winch's ears.

"Broke, eh?" asked the bear-hunter as he came alongside.

"Just look at that."

Unsuspecting, the Rifle King leaned forward, as Ranch Rob rose suddenly erect.

His eyes flashed, and the next moment he darted at the old vengeance-hunter with the swiftness of an eagle.

With a cry of rage Old Winch felt his rifle torn from his grasp, and saw it lifted over the head of the man who had risen in his stirrups, and was about to crush his head in.

"Liar!" hissed the veteran. "You can kill Old Winch, but you can't escape the fate that's mighty nigh."

"The fate? I kill as I go, regardless of the future!" was the answer.

"This isn't Starvation Camp, but this time it's certain death. We can't be more than fifty yards from Gold Georgie. You'll never live to see her Ranch Rob's wife. I want you to die on the threshold of my triumph. Your time has come!"

Old Winch threw himself at the speaker as

the last word left his lips. At the same moment the clubbed rifle descended.

Despite the arms uplifted to break the blow, the weapon beat down all opposition, and the brave old hunter fell backward from the saddle.

"That settles another enemy!" exclaimed the ranchero. "This is what I call fighting my way to the girl; but I'll reach her. The boy will oppose me, but what do I care for a fellow like Plumas Roy? Come, Meza, we must on."

Old Winch's horse left him when he fell, and had already disappeared. But he was to come back.

Not a movement indicated that life might still exist in the body lying across the mountain trail. Captain Rob did not doubt the effect of his mad blow; he had struck to kill, and had doubtless accomplished his purpose. He did not dismount to examine his victim, but rode from the spot with Old Winch's deadly rifle clutched in his hands.

He did not see the snake-like figure that glided along a trail fifty feet overhead. If he had looked up he probably would not have seen it, for mountain bushes would have screened it from his view.

"The white herder rides further from his horns," murmured the elevated spy, while he regarded the man riding through the starlight below. "Red Star's revolver must be bewitched, but he is glad now that he did not kill the ranchero. He will make him ride a wild horse again, but this time his face will be left uncovered so that the sharp briars of the mountain can tear it."

The Indian—for Indian the speaker was—spoke with fiendish glee. All the while he was following Captain Rob.

At last he descended and crouched among the bushes along the herder's trail.

A moment later a loud about echoed among the mountains and then several pistol shots were distinctly heard.

"The men of Eldorado!" exclaimed Rob, instinctively reining in his horse. "They've overtaken somebody—a gang of Indians probably. There! it is all over."

The rapid firing had ceased, and a strange stillness had ensued.

"I don't want to be bothered with them," the ranchero went on. "Lasso Dan is meddlesome; the girl's face might attract him. I'm willing to fight for her, of course, but I don't want all Gold Valley pitted against me."

All at once a figure left the trail-side.

The ranchero started and whirled to meet it, but before he could cover it with rifle or revolver it alighted astride of the horse directly behind him, and a pair of hands encircled his neck.

"No shootin', no talk, cap'n!" was hissed at his ear, and away went his horse bearing them both from the scene at a gait that threatened to unseat them.

Captain Rob could not turn his head for the purpose of looking into his captor's face, but he knew that he had fallen into the hands of an Indian, and he fancied that the red-skin's identity was no great mystery.

He felt that his enemy was almost as merciless as Big Pedro had proved to be, for the long, red fingers at his throat almost shut off his breath; he was gasping for air, yet he could not make his wants known.

On, on went the horse, urged to his utmost speed by a glittering object strapped to one of the red-skin's heels.

"This is torture unendurable!" flashed through the ranchero's mind. "I might as well make an effort for liberty. Death will soon come anyway, if the red devil doesn't loosen his grip."

Ranch Rob attempted to unseat his foe by suddenly falling backward, but he discovered that the Indian was seated firmly on the animal's back, and he was obliged to desist because of the tightening of the fingers at his throat.

"White herder take 'nother ride by'mby!" said the red-man. "Red Star no kill 'im when him shoot 'while ago."

"No, curse you! you did not want to kill me then!" thought Ranch Rob. "Give me a show for my life! grant me an opportunity—"

He paused abruptly, for one of the Indian's hands had left his trachea, and reined in the horse. The next instant he was hurled from the saddle to the ground, from which he rose in a half-dazed manner, for the severe choking had almost deprived him of sensibility. He saw the form of his foe, and if there had been forty Red Stars in the pass he would have done what he did.

The hand that he threw to his belt found not

the butt of a revolver, but the handle of a bowie. The next instant the blade glittered in the starlight, and he sprung at the Indian.

If the ranchero's spring was full of the tiger's passion that rankled at his heart, he was met by an antagonist worthy of his steel.

Red Star did not recoil a step, but rather went forward to meet the onset, and his right hand closed about the ranchero's wrist as the blow was dealt.

"Ranchero no find Red Star's heart yet!" exclaimed the red-skin, whose vise-like grip the baffled white man could not shake off. "Him no die when him ride before with his face painted yellow and covered up. Mebbe the horse will carry him to the wolf trails this time."

"What's that, you infernal Injun?" grated the ranchero. "You would make me play Mazeppa again would you? By the gods! I've played that role for the last time!"

"Ranchero see!"

Endowed with much natural strength, and fully resolved that the Indian should not triumph, Captain Rob attempted to free himself. The struggle that followed was a trial of stratagem and strength, but the savage had administered a choking which aided his cause, and the herder found himself again in his power.

A blow knocked him senseless, and Red Star disappeared for a moment.

When he came back he bore a coil of rope like a lasso in his hands. Stooping over the herder's form, he fastened one end of the cord around his feet, and the other to the horse in a manner that would cause the herder to be dragged at his heels when he should move on again.

All the time the eyes of the red-skin glittered with a fiendish triumph, ever ready to animate the spirits of his race.

"Ranchero never come back after this ride!" hissed Red Star, rising at last from his victim.

"Ha! he opens his eyes. Ranchero, Red Star talks."

"I understand you, you dirty red wolf!" was the answer. "You have tied me to the end of a lasso. I am at the heels of my horse."

"Ranchero knows all. Is he ready?"

"Yes! carry your devilry as far as you can to-night for to-morrow the tables may be turned."

"No turn—never, Ranchero!" was the response. "Good by, brother! you go now."

The Indian sprang to the horse.

As he did so a dozen mounted men dashed upon the scene.

"I heard somebody talkin'—I'd sw'ar to it, boys," said a rough voice.

"I am here, Lasso!" rung from the ranchero's throat.

"Cap'n Rob!"

The horsemen spurred forward, but Red Star vaulted into the ranchero's saddle, and dashed away. As he gave the steed the one spur he wore, he whirled and emptied a revolver in the faces of the roughs of Gold Valley.

A loud, mad yell was the response and the challenge was answered by a rapid discharge of firearms as the whites started in pursuit.

But no one saw the man being dragged over the trail close to the heels of the horse ridden by the red-skin!

CHAPTER XIV.

THE RESULTS OF THE CHASE.

"We have had strange adventures since we separated in the mountain pass. You have eluded both Ranch Rob and Red Carlos, his friend, and I have not been less fortunate. I have lost Old Winch, perhaps forever, and Red Star and I separated for a double purpose, after the brave red-skin rescued me from the roughs of Eldorado. But we are together again, thank fortune, and duty shall keep me at your side, Georgie, until the end of your life has been reached."

We need not inform the reader that the above language was addressed to Gold Georgie, Old Winch's beautiful ward, by Plumas Roy.

The two young people had accidentally and fortunately met in the mountains—Roy mounted on the steed which had carried him safely from the men of Eldorado, and Gold Georgie was the rider of Red Carlos's big white mustang.

It is needless to say that the meeting was a source of inexpressible delight to both, nor that they had resolved to stick together spite of anything that might attempt to separate them.

Gold Georgie's captivity had been short. She was aware that her face had attracted the ranchero, and Roy was wondering whether she had discovered that he was the man whose life she had sworn to take, when she suddenly addressed him:

"You have known this herder king," she said.

"Tell me about him."

Roy started.

"Then you do not know—"

He paused, caught himself, and changed color for the eyes of the girl were fastened upon him.

"Ah! I begin to see now!" she exclaimed, "I have been the captive of my father's slayer, my mother's persecutor?"

"You have."

"Why did I not know it when I had it in my power to end my hunt? Once, shortly after my capture in the pass, I saw his revolver within my reach. I could have flushed everything then; but I did not dream that the man whose face was as dark as a Moor's was my great enemy, yet he was."

"Old Winch must have known it."

"He was a strange man. He used to say that he would take me to the villain and let me avenge the parents whom he slew. He never told me that Ranch Rob was the man, yet he has dropped many broad hints. But, never mind, Roy, fate may yet bring us together. If he is to fall by the daughter's hand we need not wait long."

"After that—"

"After that I will go back to Sonoma. There I may forget that one-half of my life has been a vengeance-hunt. I would forget that, Roy."

"And with it your friends?"

"Not so bad as that, let us hope," answered the girl, with a smile. "I have a few friends, and you are one of them."

Did the youth's cheeks redden as he caught Gold Georgie's look?

"I am your friend, Georgie, but I would be more if—"

"Hark!"

As the word fell from the girl's lips she touched Roy's arm, sending a pleasurable thrill through his body, and the twain listened intently.

They heard the far-away reports of mountain revolvers, and the faintest echoes of some fierce yells.

"White men!" exclaimed the girl, scarcely above a whisper. "The roughs of Gold Valley, perhaps."

Roy did not reply, but listened on as though the sounds possessed a spell that fascinated him.

"Roy, Roy! they are coming this way!" suddenly exclaimed the girl. "We must be in Echo Gulch, a place which Old Winch used to say was the most remarkable spot among these mountains."

"This is a portion of Echo Gulch," answered the youth. "The men of Eldorado may be miles away or quite near; but we shall soon know. If they cross the hollow bridge they are very near."

"The hollow bridge?" echoed the girl; "where and what is it?"

"Wait a moment."

A minute later a sound like that of hoofs on a bridge was distinctly heard.

Roy whirled and seized the bridle rein of the girl's steed.

"Come!" he cried. "They are very near. They are after an enemy. There! a dozen horses are thundering over the hollow bridge, which is nothing more than the roof of a cave under the gulch."

Gold Georgie did not resist, but permitted Plumas Roy to lead her away, and they were soon flying from the spot.

"We must let them all pass," he said at length, guiding his horse to one side of the trail, where both drew rein not a second too soon.

A horse that bore a rider lying along his neck flew past. At the same time something rough like the end of a lasso struck Roy in the face, and almost knocked him from the saddle.

"Heavens!" gasped the girl bending over to catch him. "Roy, what was that thing? It cut the air like an arrow, and—"

"Sh! the chasers!" interrupted the youth.

Yes, the pursuers were on hand!

That they were white men, gray-shirted and rough in every particular the startled young couple could see as they shot by.

"The men of the mines—Eldorado's spawn!" said Roy half under his breath. "What if their enemy was Old Winch?"

"It cannot be he!" replied Georgie. "Let us hope that the brave old man is safe somewhere. But your face is bleeding!"

"It is blood," admitted Roy, removing his hand from his cheek. "That object by which I was struck cut like a knife, yet it was not steel. I am sure of that."

"What was it, then?"

"Let us call it a mystery for the present, Georgie. It might have been the end of a lasso, but I will not waste time conjecturing. Ah! the men of Eldorado have passed!"

"They are coming back!" exclaimed the girl. "They have either captured their game or given up the chase."

It was true that certain sounds now indicated that the roughs who had dashed past them a minute before were returning at a more moderate gait.

As the young couple would only betray their whereabouts by riding away, they kept among the deep shadows of the gulch walls and held their breaths.

If their horses should whinny all would be lost, and while they covered their steeds' nostrils with their caps, they kept one finger at the trigger of a revolver.

"The precipice saved the Injun if he does lie crushed three hundred feet below us!" exclaimed a coarse voice as the returning band reached a point in the gulch trail opposite the pair's position.

"We would hev skinned 'im alive!" was the rejoinder. "But whar is Ranch?—that's the puzzle."

"Somewhar 'twixt hyar an' whar we heard his voice, Ez sure ez death, boys, thet red-skin hed Ranch at the end ov his lasso when he started off, but he warn't thar when the hoss cleared the cliff."

"Ov course he warn't. Look sharp along the rail. We may hev galloped over Ranch."

Roy and Georgie saw the men of Eldorado lean

forward and inspect the road they had lately galloped over at a breakneck speed.

"Ah! they will find my enemy dead if they find him at all," ejaculated Georgie turning to the young miner. "Her—ends the trail of a lifetime."

"We will wait and see," replied Roy. "Hug this wall close and wait for me. The men of Eldorado will not come back."

The youth slid from his horse whose reins he had already put into Georgie's hands, and crept after the dozen roughs who had already disappeared.

Old Winch's ward was left alone.

The star dials were pointing toward the dawn of another day. The long night full of exciting adventures and deadly peril was drawing to a close, and the young girl felt the need of rest as well as the powers of sleep.

Unable to resist tired nature's sweet restorer, Gold Georgie fell asleep in her saddle, presenting a lovely picture which only the stars saw.

She did not see the figure that crept to her side after about a half-hour's slumber. It came from the direction in which the men of Eldorado had disappeared.

"She needs sleep, poor child!" said the newcomer in a kind voice as he halted beside the girl at whom he gazed with a smile. "But if I withhold my discovery, she will not thank me when she does wake."

So he touched her gently, and the fair avenger opened her eyes with a start.

"It is you, thank Heaven, Roy!" she exclaimed.

"You have made a discovery?"

"Yes," was the answer, "the devil takes care of his own, girl. The roughs of the Valley have found the ranchero."

"Alive?"

"Alive!"

"Fortune, I thank thee!" cried Gold Georgie. "Where is he, Roy? Let him feel the vengeance which fate has delayed till this hour."

The eager girl lifted the rein as she spoke, but Roy did not stir.

"Not to-night," he said, firmly. "When the time comes, I will show you Captain Rob."

CHAPTER XV.

AT LAST!

PLUMAS ROY had witnessed the finding of the ranchero by his friends, the mounted troop from the mining camp.

Fortunately for the herder he had not been dragged far by the Indian's lasso; if he had, the roughs would have found a disfigured corpse on the mountain trail instead of a man mad enough to swear eternal vengeance against all his enemies.

Captain Rob had effected his escape from a horrible doom by the noose slipping from his feet, and that at a moment when he was jerked to one side of the trail where he was left stunned and bruised, but safe from the hoofs of the miners' steeds.

"I look like a beggar!" exclaimed the ranchero, surveying his torn garments in the light of the torches which the men of Gold Valley held over the scene closely watched by the youth crouched near by. "But I am Ranch Rob, and still ready for the bloodiest trail a man has ever followed. Ah! you haven't got the Injun?"

"No," answered Lasso Dan, but not until he had thrown a significant glance among his men. "The red Greaser got away—"

"For me to settle with him!" grated the ranchero. "Heavens! won't it be a vengeance, though? What trail did the skunk take? If he made the turn this side the cliff—"

"Thar's whar he failed, Rob!" interrupted the captain of the troop.

A cry of bitter disappointment fell from the ranchero's lips.

"What! has the red-skin escaped me forever?" he cried. "Do you tell me, Lasso, that Red Star will never feel my revenge?"

"It looks that way, cap'n."

"I don't believe it! One hundred feet below the precipice twenty trees jut out from between the rocks. He stopped there—I know he did! Fate is not going to let the dog escape me."

Was the ranchero mad?

As he finished he strode to Lasso Dan's side, and looked up into his bearded face as he laid his hand on his arm.

"I want a horse, Lasso—a horse and one hundred feet of rope," he exclaimed. "Don't try to talk me out of neither. Red Star never fell to the bottom of the wall. He lies, my victim, among the trees. The horse and the rope! You will not refuse them?"

"Ov course not, captain; thar they ar'!"

"We'll take the shortest route to the cliff," announced the herder, when he found himself seated in the saddle once more. "If Red Star had taken it I wouldn't be here and he wouldn't be waiting for me where he is at this moment. Come, my brave fellows. Don't put out your torches. We shall need them when we get there."

As the entire troop rode into a narrow opening which appeared to be a trail, Plumas Roy stole back to Gold Georgie, whose slumbers he interrupted, and whom he told, as we have seen, that her enemy still lived.

We will follow the ranchero and his comrades.

"We are here!" fell suddenly from Ranch Rob's tongue, as he reined his steed near the edge of a cliff which stood revealed by the flaming torches carried by the desperadoes at his back.

He dismounted as he spoke, and went forward with burning eagerness in his eyes.

He was confident of finding his red enemy still alive among the tops of the giant trees that grew on

a ledge of rock and earth one hundred feet below. If Red Star had thus escaped with his life, he was still a prisoner, for, without the aid of a rope two hundred feet long, he could never hope to leave the ledge, and would be compelled to die there in mid-air as it were.

The roughs saw Captain Rob take a torch from the hands of one of their number as he moved toward the brink of the cliff; they saw him kneel fearlessly among the loose rocks that strewed it and lean forward to look below.

Suddenly the ranchero threw the torch down through the darkness it had failed to dissipate, and saw it land among the trees, where it remained and blazed with new vigor.

All at once a wild cry pealed from his throat.

"The rope! the rope!" he exclaimed, springing back and turning to the expectant miners. "Fortune has not deserted me! Red Star is where I said we would find him—among the trees, now my victim!"

He caught with a tigerish cry the coil of rope which Lasso Dan pitched forward, and turned toward the cliff again with the frenzied shout of a madman.

The miners leaped from their steeds and followed him.

"Ah! the torch still burns where it fell!" said the ranchero, rising from a look over the brink of the precipice. "Don't you see the body lying a little to the left of the flame, Lasso?"

"I see it, Ranchero—"

"That is Red Star—helpless but not dead! I saw him move the slightest while ago."

"He may be armed," suggested Lasso Dan.

"Armed after falling a hundred feet?" was the ranchero's exclamation. "Were he doubly armed, though, I would rescue him for vengeance!"

"It will be difficult to lasso him."

"Who talks of doing that? I'm going down for him!"

The roughs exchanged looks of astonishment.

"Try the lassoes!" continued the captain. "They make a hundred and fifty feet of strong rope you say? Good! Now a noose for a stirrup. I'm ready to recover my man."

Lasso Dan did not try to dissuade the avenger from his avowed purpose. He took the rope in his hands and assured Ranch Rob that he should be carefully lowered, and drawn up again at his bidding.

With eyes that blazed with anticipated triumph, the herder king descended over the edge of the cliff, and was lowered by the strong fellows who held the well-tied lassoes.

He kept his eyes fixed on the human figure lying among the boughs and partly in the light of the torch.

Red Star had probably thrown himself from his horse as the animal leaped from the cliff, and while the gallant steed had been dashed to death, he had fallen among the trees to be preserved for the man who hated him so cordially—the man whom he had hunted in revenge for a wrong inflicted and endured years before.

Before descending the precipice Rob had loosened his belt weapons, for Lasso Dan's words concerning the probability of Red Star being armed, had recurred to him, and he thought it best to be prepared for an emergency.

Still the figure lying like a crushed man among the boughs had showed no signs of active life since the descent of his torch. If the cunning red-skin was shamming, he was playing his role to perfection.

Nearer and nearer approached the eager ranchero.

"He is mine, sure enough!" he suddenly ejaculated. "As I expected, the red-skin is alive, but harmless. The spark of life that remains I will fan into a flame and then make him wish that he had followed his horse to the bottom of the gulch."

Ranch Rob now saw that a pair of eyes were fixed intently upon him, and he was near enough to notice that the red hands of his victim were clinging to a bough to prevent him from falling on down to certain death.

It was like the eagle swooping mercilessly down upon the helpless lamb.

"Didn't think I'd come, eh?" chuckled the ranchero as his feet touched the tree that supported the Indian. "I was bound to find you again. If you had dragged me a thousand miles at your horse's heels, I would have been preserved to pay you back!"

It was a tone of triumph in which these exulting words were spoken, but there was no reply.

The face of the Indian was as expressionless as the face of a carved Sphinx. The eyes still regarded the ranchero, but the look was a stare which might mean wonder, or nothing, just as one was inclined to interpret it.

The torch blazing up a few feet away revealed the strange meeting in the tree. It was evident that the terrible fall had maimed Red Star, else he would have crept from the tree to the ledge where he would not be compelled to clutch a bough to sustain himself.

"Hurt, eh?" cried Captain Rob, irritated by the Indian's silence. "Back broken, probably, or all your limbs! But no difference, so it isn't your neck. We're going up now."

As he finished he stooped and ran his left arm under the red-skin's body. There was no groan, but a sudden twitching of the lips told that the touch had caused indescribable pain.

"Pull, boys—I've got the red!" shouted Rob to the men above as he gave the rope a jerk, and then he added in a lower voice as he looked at his prey: "There'll be twitching ov another kind before daylight, my red friend."

The next moment the enemies were drawn clear of the tree-top, and were swinging in mid-air over a gulch whose bottom was so far beneath them that they could not see it.

Red Star was the most inconvenient of burdens, for he lay limp and helpless across the ranchero's arm. The herder had to tax all his strength to sustain the weight of his foe; but he was equal to the task.

It had proved a fatal fall for the once proud Indian. Red Star was near the end of his last trail.

The distance between the trees and the edge of the precipice was being slowly lessened, and Captain Rob could see the anxious, but rough faces that peered down upon him.

"A few more good pulls, boys, and then vengeance!" exclaimed the ranchero. "The Injun is mum, but he knows that talking would do 'im no good. He'll hold out till I've dealt with him."

The next second wild cries burst from the throats of the men that lined the cliff, for, without warning, one of the red-skin's arms had encircled the ranchero's neck, and his red right hand had jerked the bowie from his belt.

"Great God! I'm in a trap!" gasped Ranch Rob, who dared not use force to disengage the red-skin's arm, lest they both would fall from the rope and be precipitated through space to certain death.

He was in a trap which threatened to put a speedy and bloody end to his existence.

Fire seemed to shoot from Red Star's eyes.

His terrible grip tightened about the herder's neck, and the bowie upraised in his right hand, flashed before the white man's eyes.

"Red Star can talk!" hissed the Indian. "Did Ranch think that the fall had broken the Indian's tongue? When will the white man tie Red Star to a horse's tail? Ah! the trails of the two trailers will end when the chief strikes!"

Already a number of revolvers had been thrust over the precipice. Captain Rob saw the flashing eyes and the determined visages behind them. He still clung to the rope with his right hand, and the men whom he could not see were still drawing him upward.

"Shoot, but make sure that you hit the Injun!" was the command that peril forced him to send up to the men with the revolvers.

He saw that he would never get to carry out his revenge on the red-skin, for whom he had already risked his life. It would be a miracle if he escaped alive, for the blazing eyes and trembling arm of the savage told him that the bowie aimed at his heart would soon descend.

"Ranchero dies now!" exclaimed Red Star. "With his own knife in his heart, he will meet his friends!"

Captain Rob made one desperate effort to ward off the blow with the hand that did not clutch the rope.

At that critical moment the loud command "Fire!" rung out overhead, and the revolvers flashed in the ranchero's face.

He fell back and whirled half-way round like a person bullet struck, but did not fall from the rope.

The following second he knew he was alone, for Red Star was not to be seen.

"Hold fast, Ranchero!" exclaimed a voice from above, and as he clutched the rope with a firmer grip he was whisked through the air and drawn over the edge of the cliff before he could collect his scattered senses.

"I reckon you'll never go down thar arter another red," said Lasso Dan. "Did he give you the knife?"

"No, but it was a close call. Where are the men who shot the red-skin loose?"

Lasso Dan designated the six rescuers.

"I thank you, boys, but I wish you had merely stunned the Injun," the ranchero said, as he gazed at his preservers.

"Jehosaphat! jes' hear 'im!" burst forth the leader of the troop. "Mebbe, Ranchero, you'll wish we had merely stunned Pedro, whom we tackled back in the mountains, afore we found you an' Red Star?"

"Pedro, the Merciless, the man who tried to burn me alive!" demanded the ranchero. "You met him after his failure? Where is he?"

"Oh, he rode off, but full of lead, cap'n," was the response. "We didn't know what he'd tried to do, but we 'lowed that some devil like him hed fired the grass. With Pedro dead an' Red Star finished, who comes next, Ranchero? Name yer man. The men ov Gold Valley ar' ready fur anything."

The eyes of the ranchero surveyed the swarthy faces by which he was surrounded, but did not reply, although he said to himself:

"Why the girl comes next, of course. I'll be hunted no longer from this night. Pedro, the Merciless, I wish you had lived to be dealt with by me. When I go back to my ranch I can put up the revolvers I have carried for years, and bas' in the smiles of the queen of Gold Valley. Ah! Ranchero, your fortunes are on the mend."

He was mounted again.

"Lasso Dan, I will see you and the boys at Eldorado to-morrow," he said, turning upon the troop. "Let me seek a trail of my own to-night. Red Star is dead, Pedro the Merciless has lassoed his last man, and Old Winch—"

"Thar! he's the fellar we want to hear about, cap'n."

"He is dead! If you'll go back by the way of Gold Pass you'll find him lying across the trail."

A loud shout burst from the listeners' throats.

"We'll go back that way, Ranchero!" said Lasso Dan.

The parting then took place, and the herder king sat on his horse alone near the edge of the cliff.

As for Lasso Dan and his gray-shirted followers, they soon reached the place called Gold Pass, but

their horses did not halt before the corpse of an old man.

Daylight had come again and the trail was visible, but the men of Eldorado found nothing but a few drops of blood.

"We'll hear ov Old Winch ag'in," averred Lasso Dan, seriously, and for a moment the company seemed about to resume the hunt for him; but it was voted to return to Eldorado.

Away the gray shirts went with Dan at their head. If they had turned back, they might have seen a horse slowly climbing a mountain trail with the figure of a man lying motionless along his neck.

"Take me to Gold Georgie, old boss, an' I'll pass in my chips without a murmur!" this man was saying.

"If I can't see her reach ther end ov her trail, I kin tell 'er not to furgit the shootin' instructions I used to give 'er."

CHAPTER XVI.

THE AVENGING BULLET!

THE horse seemed to know the man's desires, his pressing needs.

He climbed the elevated trail in a manner that did not discommode his rider, and for an hour or more he kept on until he at last began to descend toward a valley that lay far beneath.

"I'm trustin' all to you, boss," remarked the old man who looked down upon the scene. "I b'lieve you know whar the gal is an' thet you're goin' to take Old Winch to 'er. I hope she an' the boy's got together, fur they're suited to one another. I'll never git to go back to Eldorado to fight the men what put this bullet in my life-box, but somebody else will do it fur me one ov these days. The wolves will fall out amongst themselves, ez mountain wolves allus do, an' they'll eat each other up with knife an' revolver. Vengeance will charge it all to my account when she balances the books. Don't be afraid to go faster, old animile. I'm able to endure a good deal yet. Ranchero would hev put more muscle inter his blow ef he hed thought thet I'd live over that one. Live?" and the old hunter chuckled strangely. "I'm fool enough to think thet I'm goin' to see Georgie at the end of her trail."

The old Rifle King was one of those iron men to be found among the mountains anywhere in the far, wild West. Some of them carry a dozen bullets in their bodies, and live to seek more in desperate encounters with lawless men. The terrible wound in the grizzly-hunter's breast was not the only hurt he had received during his exciting life.

The claws of bears, the bowies and bullets of desperadoes had sought his life in vain; but the ball he now carried in the depths of the wound that gaped near his heart was destined to end his life.

The horse carried him down to the shade of a pass and stopped unbidden to quaff his thirst at the rivulet that gushed from the foot of one of the walls.

All at once a loud exclamation sounded on the old hunter's ears, and he looked up to behold a man who had just entered the pass, and reined in his horse with a countenance that betrayed his astonishment.

"Old Winch!"

"Ranch Rob!"

The enemies had met again, and unexpectedly, too.

The night had passed away, and the fresh tints of another autumn day were beautifying the landscape.

"What kind of a head have you?" exclaimed the herder, as he came forward, having seen at a glance that the old grizzly-hunter was unarmed and consequently at his mercy. "By Jove! Winch, you are bound to be killed!"

The captain had drawn rein at the side of Old Winch's steed, and the two animals were renewing their acquaintanceship in the equine way.

"You didn't strike hard enough last night. Ranch Rob," said the veteran, calmly returning the flashes of the mad ranchero's eyes. "It seems to me that I'm to see the little beauty ag'in, in spite of everything."

"That's pretty much as I say," was the quick response. "Let me tell you, Winch, that the feud begun in Starvation Camp is to end here. I'll not risk a blow this time, but a bullet, and that straight through the brain. Red Star and Big Pedro are out of my road. You're the only obstacle left, for I don't count the boy anything."

"I would, ef I hed him ag'in me."

"Then I will watch him. I'll take your advice, Winch."

The old hunter saw the revolver as it was raised to a level with his head. Behind it were eyes that meant murder, and at the trigger was a finger that did not know how to spare.

The muzzle of the weapon was not three feet from the Rifle King's face.

"How does this look like finding Gold Georgie?" hissed the ranchero, over the glittering barrel.

There was no reply.

"You're as stubborn as the Injun was when I found him among the trees last night," continued the captain. "I give you a minute to live, or till I count ten. One—two—three—four—"

The sharp crack of a firearm interrupted the count, and the bullet that struck the outstretched revolver knocked it from the ranchero's hand.

Rob started, with a maddened cry.

"The young pair!" cried Old Winch, catching sight of two persons who stood a short distance above the bed of the pass.

An oath of rage fell from the ranchero's lips.

"Let me tell ye suthin' ye may not know, Ranch Rob," continued the old avenger, turning his eyes upon his baffled enemy. "The gal what hez ye kivered I'arned to shoot under my eye. I trained her fur the very thing she's about ter do. Don't yer

know 'er, Ranch Rob? Hev'n't you been able to see thet she looks like the Diamond ov Sonoma looked when you first saw 'er—afore you shot her husband, and hounded her to a death among the mountains?"

A cry was smothered in Ranch Rob's throat.

"It's the Diamond's righteous avenger, because Gold Georgie is her child," went on Old Winch. "She's hunted you a long time, Rob, an' I promised to see her to the end ov the trail. Thar hev been forty times since yesterday thet I thought I'd never get to see her thar; but I guess my chances hev improved. She knows who you ar', ef yer face is stained. If I hed killed you when I shot at you the day ye went through Eldorado, fastened to the boss, I expect the gal would hev turned on me, an' I wouldn't hev murmured if she hed. She'll settle the debts ov Starvation Camp ez well ez her own when she touches the trigger."

If Ranch Rob's face was pale while Old Winch spoke, the fire in his eyes did not abate.

"I am here for deeds committed years ago!" cried Gold Georgie, in a clear voice. "You have transformed me from a happy little child into an avenger. Ranch Rob—murderer, villain and brigand—we part here forever. You would have counted ten for brave Old Winch. I count but five for you. Prepare to die! One—"

The first numeral had hardly left the girl's lips when the horse ridden by the ranchero sprang forward with a snort of pain.

Old Winch gasped.

"Quick!" cried Plumas Roy. "Georgie! Georgie! he will escape!"

The beautiful avenger's answer was the quick report of the deadly weapon that still covered the desperate man.

As the detonation awoke the slumbering echoes of the landscape, Ranch Rob fell back, and Meza, his faithful horse, went on, but without a rider!

"The gal didn't disgrace her trainin'!" exclaimed the old Rifle King. "I knowed she'd shoot right when the time come. It is the end of the trail. The murderer ov the lovely Diamond ov Sonoma will ride these trails no more."

It proved a death-shot, and a minute later Gold Georgie stood on the spot where lay the corpse of the hardened ranchero of Gold Valley.

"Let 'im be, Georgie," said Old Winch. "Did he bury the poor woman he deserted to die in the mountains? Who gave the man a grave he killed a few months before thet? Look! those fellars ar' fur him!" and the old hunter pointed to a number of dark objects sailing through the ether far overhead.

Unburied, unhonored and unwept, Ranch Rob was left where the bullet of the avenging daughter had ended his life trails.

When the sun descended upon that eventful day among the mountains of California, it left to the winds and the stars a lonely grave, whose simple headboard of cedar bore this inscription:

"OLD WINCH, THE RIFLE KING."

"TRUE TO THE LAST."

As the Rifle King hunter had predicted, he lived to see Gold Georgie reach the end of her trail, and it was by her soft hands that his straggling locks of gray were brushed from his pallid brow, and his hands crossed on his breast for the sleep that knows no waking.

A year has passed since the last scene in our mountain and valley drama.

The "boss ranch of Gold Valley" has passed into strange hands, and Eldorado still exists; but the denizens of the camp are not the men once led by Lasso Dan. True to Old Winch's prophecy, they fell out among themselves, and blade and ball made room for another and, let us hope, a better class of citizens.

Pedro, the Merciless, got back to Red Carlos's estancia after his encounter with the roughs of Gold Valley, but it was to burst into the house to fall dead, shot in a dozen places.

He died believing that his fire had destroyed the herder king, and the little Mexican's swarthy vaquero gave him a western burial.

Gold Georgie suddenly reappeared in Sonoma to the surprise of every one who had missed her, and her return was celebrated by a quick wedding which became the nine days' wonder of the California town.

Plumas Roy has disposed of his claim in Gold Valley, and, with the little wife he found and won on the trail of vengeance, he lives happily in the famous capital of the great golden State.

Red Star, the vindictive red-skin, untortured by the Masked Mazeppa, sleeps unavenged in the lonely gulch.

THE END.

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